

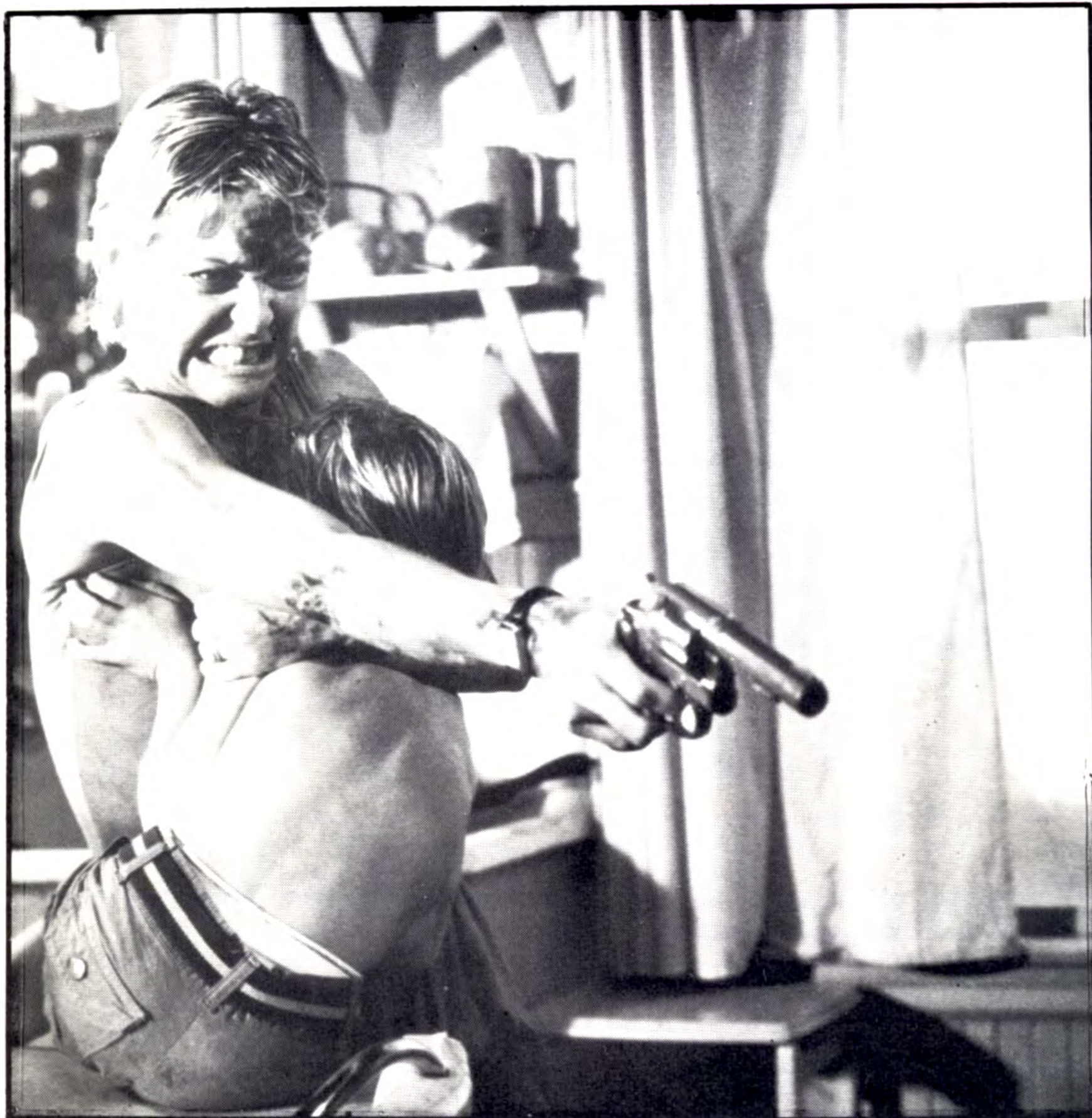
# cineACTION!

A MAGAZINE OF RADICAL FILM CRITICISM & THEORY

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Fall '85

No. 2



Stephen King: American Nightmare

Women in Contemporary Hollywood

Dominant Tendencies: An Alternative Reading



# CineAction!

## No. 2, Fall 1985

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FRONT COVER: Dee Wallace in *Cujo*.





## From the editors . . .

POSITIVE RESPONSE TO THE FIRST ISSUE of *CineAction!* has encouraged us to continue in our efforts to address the gap between inaccessible theory and chatty and banal film reviewing. We've concluded that our editorial policy must allow for relevant and clearly-argued discussion of film from anywhere across the spectrum of criticism and theory: thus the emendation of *CineAction!*'s subtitle.

This decision has also led to our inclusion of Scott Forsyth's response to and critique of Robin Wood's article on dominant tendencies in '80s Hollywood (*CineAction!*, Spring 1985). The nature of Forsyth's argument against an approach he considers reductive demanded a fully-elaborated theoretical context. The piece is ultimately rewarding in direct proportion to the effort its reading demands. Forsyth's lucid and precise writing, and the dialogue he initiates on issues vital to radical work on film, set a precedent for the kind of discussions we intend to include in future issues alongside articles with more of an emphasis on film criticism.

The theme comprising the first half of the second issue concerns women in contemporary Hollywood film. Susan Morrison's article on *Desperately Seeking Susan* addresses the relationship between a classical Hollywood film, Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, and a recent

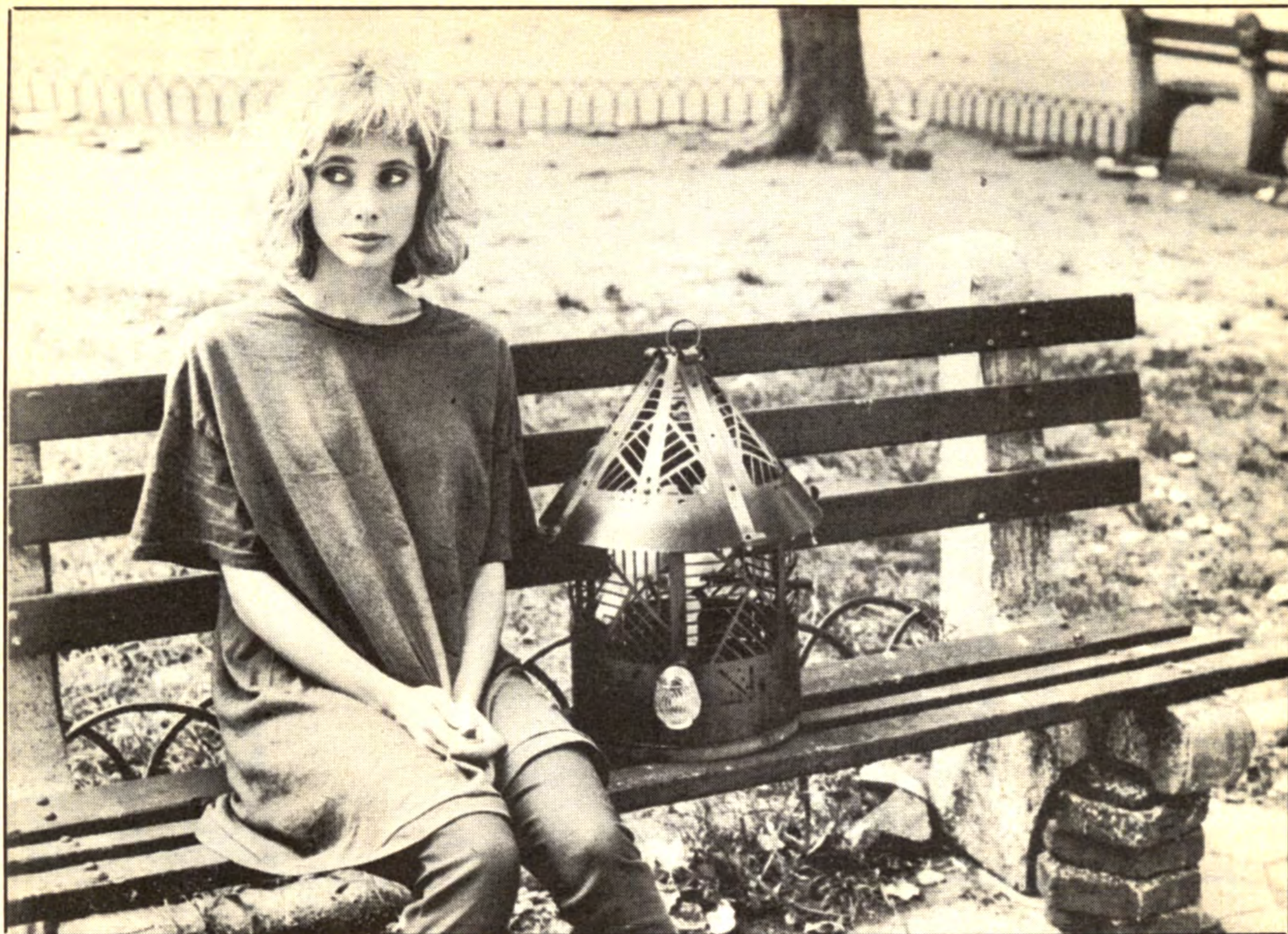
film which not only features women as its central characters, but which was also written and directed by women. Bryan Bruce discusses various strategies which have developed to enunciate a feminist perspective in mainstream film. In their article on *Love Letters*, Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe explore the sophisticated convergence of Freud and melodrama in another contemporary woman-centred film, also conceived and directed by a woman; and Robin Wood looks at *Independence Day* (again, scripted by a woman) in relation to the tradition of female rebellion through the 19th century and into the classical Hollywood melodrama.

Forsyth's piece is followed by Robin Wood's analysis of family tension in the work of Stephen King and the films based on his writing, culminating in a discussion of Lewis Teague's *Cujo*. Finally, Anthony Irwin continues our feature on neglected films of the '80s with his article on Jean-Pierre Lefèbvre's *Le Jour S . . .*

We'd like to invite reader response to the articles in this issue and to the principles of our editorial policy. Thank you for your continued support.

—Bryan Bruce & Lori Spring





**DESPERATELY SEEKING SUSAN:** Rosanna Arquette as Roberta Glass, a young, almost child-like woman caught up in romantic fantasies.

## Girls on Film: Fantasy, Desire and Desperation

by Susan Morrison

I like the idea of a woman becoming obsessed with another woman. We've seen enough movies about guys growing up, and it's about time to see the other side.

Susan Seidelman<sup>1</sup>

**A** NOT UNCOMMON COMPLAINT ABOUT THE films of the '70s was that they seemed to be overwhelmingly concerned with male: male relationships, producing the so-called 'Buddy' picture in which women were relegated to secondary roles. Played out across the movie screens of America in interminable variations were narratives notorious today for their lack of acknowledgement or recognition of the changes taking place in the social relations between men and women, effected by the burgeoning women's movement. Some recent films, such as *Tootsie*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, and *Ordinary People*, seemingly attempted to redress this absence by foregrounding problems confronting contemporary women in a patriarchal society: female independence, marriage, and the family. Yet few

would argue that these films are in any real way informed by female concerns and/or female points-of-view. Rather, they serve instead to re-centralize the importance and dominance of the male protagonist's position within the Hollywood cinema.

One of the most interesting and pleasurable aspects of *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1984) is that it is that rare instance of a contemporary film which takes as its subject the relationship, indeed obsession, of one woman with another—a relationship couched not in the conventional negative terms (i.e. jealousy), but in absolutely positive ones (i.e. admiration). Directed by a woman (Susan Seidelman), written by a woman (Leora Barish), starring two women as its centres of interest (Rosanna Arquette and Madonna), *Desperately Seeking Susan* consistently maintains a female point-of-view. In addition, the major thematic concerns of the film are precisely those which are relevant to women; namely, problems of sexuality, femininity, romance, marriage, and independence, concerns which, I might add, are both characteristic of and peculiar to those (Hollywood)



films intended for an essentially female audience, and for that reason, called 'Women's Films.'

The heyday of the 'woman's picture' was the '40s and early '50s, just prior to the onslaught of television which replaced the genre in popularity with its domesticated soap operas. A great deal of critical interest has been generated recently in looking at just how these films position and address their female spectators, with particularly interesting work being done by Mary Ann Doane, Laura Mulvey, and Griselda Pollock.<sup>2</sup> One theme recurring frequently in this literature is that of the impossibility of the 'feminine position.' Laura Mulvey, drawing on Freudian psychoanalytic theory, outlines the process of Oedipalisation for girls as necessitating the denial of an active (phallic) sexuality—the masculine position—in favor of a passive (vaginal) sexuality, demanded by their future roles as wives/mothers in bourgeois society.<sup>3</sup> Passive sexuality, denoting the feminine position, is seen by Griselda Pollock as a negative locus where the woman is silenced and repressed.<sup>4</sup> Doane, in analysing the act of identification required of a film spectator, explains what she describes as the customary trans-sex identification of female spectator with male character by stating, "It is understandable that women would want to be men . . . for everyone wants to be elsewhere than in the feminine position."<sup>5</sup>

*Desperately Seeking Susan* offers us an opportunity to examine the ways in which the woman's picture has been updated and transformed, for it opens up the possibilities of behavior and action to its 'good girl' protagonist that were closed to the 'good girl' protagonists of earlier films. Our task is made that much easier by the inclusion of an actual clip from one of the classic Gothic Romance type of Melodramas, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940). In *Desperately Seeking Susan*, the protagonist, Roberta/Rosanna Arquette, has been described for us as a young, almost child-like woman caught up in romantic fantasies culled from reading the newspaper personal columns. Sitting in a darkened kitchen after guests at her birthday party have left, she watches television; in fact, watches the scene from *Rebecca* in which Laurence Olivier as Maxim de Winter says to his wife, Joan Fontaine, as he holds her head tenderly in his hands:

It's gone forever. That funny young lost look I loved. It won't ever come back. I killed that when I told you about Rebecca. It's gone. In a few hours, you've grown so much older.

This dialogue culminates in the couple's passionate embrace, which is (extra) diegetically broken by Roberta's husband's entrance into the kitchen, for he turns on the lights, disrupting the television romance with his concrete presence. What I would like to suggest is that this scene offers us the key to one possible reading of *Desperately Seeking Susan*, a reading indicated as well by the director's comments cited at the beginning of the paper: that *Desperately Seeking Susan* closely parallels *Rebecca* in that it, too, is about a 'little girl' who, over the course of a 'few hours' of screen time, grows us through the indirect intervention of another woman with whose 'difference' she is fascinated, if not obsessed. The little girl coming to terms with this difference, i.e. with female sexuality, is what causes the maturation to take place. Let me note at this point that the terms of maturation are very different, a fact that I will return to later on.

What is at once remarkable in both films is that their very titles duplicate the overshadowing of the protagonist that occurs within each film. Joan Fontaine, significantly enough unnamed throughout *Rebecca*—unnamed except as an

adjunct to the male, as 'Mrs. de Winter,' or 'the new bride'—is indubitably the protagonist of the film, yet its title refers not to her but to the first Mrs. de Winter, Rebecca, who never appears physically in the film. Nevertheless, her disembodied presence is felt more strongly than is Joan Fontaine's actual presence. Similarly, in *Desperately Seeking Susan*, the title refers not to the central character of the film, Roberta Glass, but to the woman with whom she is fascinated. This splitting, thus implied before the films begin, is made explicit in the opening sequence of each film where the absent woman's power to fascinate is firmly established against the protagonist's very lack of that power.

*Rebecca* opens after an introductory framing sequence, with the first shot of Maxim de Winter standing on the edge of a cliff, gazing out at the sea as if hypnotically drawn towards it. His foot slips slightly, sending some stones crashing down the side of the precipice and, at that moment, a voice cries out to him to stop. The Joan Fontaine character then appears, meek and child-like, clutching a sketchbook to her chest, shoulders hunched over as if to belie the fact that she is a young woman rather than a little girl, a direct



**REBECCA:** Joan Fontaine as the meek and child-like second Mrs. de Winter.



contrast to the spell set by Maxim's melancholic brooding. Like a father to a child, he chides her brusquely for her intrusion on his privacy, and dismisses her abruptly from his sight. The apparent meaning here is that his thoughts were on his first wife, Rebecca, who drowned in a boating accident, and whose loss cannot be replaced by this mere 'slip of a girl.'

*Desperately Seeking Susan* opens in a beauty salon, where Roberta is getting a new 'look' as a birthday present from her sister-in-law, Leslie. "Don't worry, your husband will love it," the hairdresser exclaims, shoving her head down into the sink as he prepares to shampoo her hair. Right from the start, it is obvious that she is used to being told what to do, and, like a good little girl, she obeys. Under the hairdryer, Roberta reads the personals, and discovers a communication between two lovers, Susan and Jim, whose trysts are arranged through the newspaper, and whose relationship she has been following for some time. "Desperately Seeking Susan," she reads, and comments to Leslie that 'desperate' is such a romantic word. Thus, even though we don't see Susan in this first sequence, what has been fixed for us is that she is a romantic figure (like Rebecca), whose way of life contrasts strongly with the more mundane existence/appearance of Roberta (or the Joan Fontaine character).

\* \* \*



**REBECCA:** Joan Fontaine and Laurence Olivier watching Manderley burn: at last, the good girl grows up into a mature woman.

The distinction between good and bad girl has changed. When I was growing up . . . there were very clear cut lines. You were either one or the other. I always felt bad girls had more fun and that good girls were boring.

Susan Seidelman<sup>6</sup>

**B**OTH *REBECCA* AND *DESPERATELY SEEKING SUSAN* set up very clearcut distinctions between their protagonist and the woman with whom she is obsessed, distinctions which form the conventional sexual opposition of good girl/bad girl. While this dichotomy is exceedingly common in Hollywood films, what is unusual is that here, in both films, 'good girl' is associated with 'awkward child,' and 'bad girl' associated with 'confident woman.' In other words, the categories are not merely sexual, but developmental as well, with the implication being that some movement from one position to the other is required of the protagonist. At this point, I would like to look at the ways in which each film effects this development, and to compare the 'price paid' by the protagonist for her newly-won maturity.

### COMING INTO HER OWN: THE FORTIES VERSION

Both films take great care to present their heroine as naive, childish, and clumsy. The Joan Fontaine character in *Rebecca* is rather plain in appearance, with practical if not girlish clothing (her evening dress with its puffed sleeves has all the sophistication of a 12-year-old's first formal). Her movements are timid and tenuous, her demeanor painfully shy. Not only is she continually being addressed as a little girl, but her behavior indicates an acceptance of that dependence and helplessness commonly associated with childhood. One excruciating sequence which reflects this is when she is in the morning room, seated at Rebecca's writing desk. Confronted by her predecessor's supreme competence as a 'great lady,' her (unconscious) response is to prove her own incompetence by knocking over and smashing a china figurine. What is worse, she hides the broken pieces at the back of the desk drawer, an action which only compounds her humiliation later when she has to admit her guilt to the stern Mrs. Danvers. It soon becomes apparent that, for his own reasons, her husband has a certain stake in her remaining a little girl. When she frustratedly exclaims to him that she wishes she were 36, and dressed in black satin and pearls, he responds that, if she were, he wouldn't be there with her. A (sexually) mature woman can mean only one thing to Maxim—danger. The tensions that occur between husband and wife derive from Joan Fontaine's desire to become like Rebecca, i.e. a woman, and Maxim's need to keep her as unlike his first wife as possible, i.e. a child. The key figure around which these tensions revolve, of course, is Rebecca. She is the paradigm against which Joan Fontaine is constantly being measured. The fact that we never see her, only hear about her, enhances her extraordinary charms, for our imagination, filling in the missing visual details, can thus idealize her beyond any possible actuality. What we do see are her elegant surroundings (her bedroom, her lingerie, her writing desk . . .), all unmistakably marked with her exquisite taste as well as her monogram. Joan Fontaine, confronted with this apparition of the perfect woman, can only wish to emulate her, a desire culminating in her unwitting repetition of Rebecca's masquerade costume, a repetition to which Maxim responds with horror. What the Joan Fontaine character doesn't know (and neither does the audience at this





**DESPERATELY SEEKING SUSAN:** Madonna as Susan, the ultimate fantasy figure for every repressed little girl.

point) is that Rebecca was sexually amoral and guilty of licentious behavior. Externally a model of perfection, internally she was corrupt. The concrete mark of this corruption is the cancerous growth which, as Tania Modleski has indicated,<sup>7</sup> is used as a *deus ex machina* to punish women for both sexual abstinence (spinsterhood) and sexual indulgence (nymphomania) alike. First thought to be a child growing inside her—a pregnancy, the sign of motherhood—the cancer serves as divine retribution for her flouting of bourgeois convention. Maxim's involvement—his striking her, faking the drowning, identifying the wrong body, even his somewhat brutal treatment of Joan Fontaine—is glossed over, justified and excused within the narrative so that a 'happy ending' may ensue. To a '40s audience, sexuality outside of marriage, whose aim is illicit pleasure rather than procreation, was rightfully punishable by death. To an '80s audience, however, the ideological necessity of punishing the sexually independent woman seems oppressive and unnecessarily cruel.

What we have in *Rebecca*, then, is a moral tale whose message instructs its (female) audience about the perils of active sexuality, which promotes the only possible position for women within bourgeois society, a safe, passive 'femininity,' completely contained within marriage. The good girl grows up into a mature woman, fully warned about the evils of an active female sexuality, fully sobered by (knowledge of) its excesses. This maturation is visually coded in *Rebecca* by Joan Fontaine's transformation on several levels: physically, she now stands erect, shoulders back, hair swept behind her ears or up under her hat; emotionally, she's calm, totally in control, strong at last; and in her dress, she now wears more sophisticated (but not sexy!) outfits. Through knowledge of what a 'bad girl' does (and absolute rejection of it) the good girl grows up to be a woman.

## COMING INTO HER OWN: THE EIGHTIES VERSION

In *Desperately Seeking Susan*, Roberta, too, is portrayed as a child-like woman, desperately trying to please everyone, to play the role of 'Daddy's little girl.' She is continually apologizing to people, even (and especially) when she isn't at fault—a cinematic trope delightful to all females in the audience who know the oppression of that self-deprecating expression, 'I'm sorry,' as much a part of a good little girl's repertoire as the ubiquitous smile. Roberta's appearance is carefully arranged to match (pink dress, pink lipstick, '60s hairdo) as is the décor associated with her (pink beauty salon, pink bedroom). She is awkward and clumsy, banging into a pushcart, knocking clothes off a display rack. Her husband patronizes her, patting her on the head, telling her what to do, and what not to do. For this passive existence, she substitutes a fantasy life of excitement, using the figure of Susan as her escape valve. An excellent visual rendering of this occurs during the birthday sequence at her house in Fort Lee, N.J., when, confronted with Gary's crass television commercial, she moves away from the scene in disgust, opens a window, and gazes out to the skyline of Manhattan, travelling in imagination (signalled by camera movement) across the lighted bridge, into the lighted city. The 'doppelgänger' effect is made evident here, for the ensuing cut takes us to Susan who, having just crossed that very same bridge by bus, is getting off at the Port Authority, New York's bus depot. The camera movement across the bridge thus doubles in significance—standing in for Roberta's imagination and Susan's action.

A stronger contrast between the two lead characters can hardly be imagined. To Roberta's squeaky clean suburban style is countered Susan's very earthy street-smart ways. She



is the ultimate fantasy figure for every repressed little girl, flaunting her sexuality, yet fully in control of herself and her situation. Physically, she defies received notions of anorexic glamor; this woman is no frail high fashion model with hollow cheeks and mannered stance, such as *Vogue* would have us dream about. With her strong body (especially those arms!), she looks as though she can take care of herself. Her clothing reinforces this image in an interesting way, for it literally turns accepted conventions inside out. Susan combines the most provocative of female garb, worn in the most ostentatious of ways—what any good girl would call 'extreme bad taste.' In one key scene, she goes into downtown Manhattan dressed in a man's undershirt, boxer shorts, garter belt over the shorts, lacy stockings, and, worn on top of all this, a man's shirt unbuttoned, an odd juxtaposition to say the least.

Some observations made by Mary Ann Doane in an article called "Film and the Masquerade" seem worth interjecting at this point, as they are pertinent to the character of Susan as constructed in the film. Doane refers to the two possible sites of resistance for the female unwilling to enter into the Oedipal compact: *transvestism*, where, by dressing like a male, she is thereby permitted, socially, to act like one (e.g., *Ruby Gentry*, *Written on the Wind*); and *masquerade*, where she foregrounds her femininity to excess, masking the fact that she is actually taking the active, masculine role.<sup>8</sup> The *femme fatale* from film noirs like *Double Indemnity*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and *Out of the Past*, exemplifies this deception, representing as she does the most alluring and enticing of females, presented passively for the male gaze, who, by manipulating the weaker male, proves herself to be the stronger sex, in actuality. In *Desperately Seeking Susan*, the character of Susan (as well as the persona of Madonna, the pop singer who plays the role) presents us with a figure who not only combines both possibilities, i.e. transvestism and masquerade, but does it in such a way as to set one off against the other, making us aware of the social constraints at issue.

Roberta's passage to womanhood is marked out in the film by her gradual adoption of the less excessive aspects of Susan's personality and appearance. By the end of the film, she has shed her shy suburban cuteness and acquired more outwardly womanly characteristics. Her clothes and hair closely resemble a toned-down version of Susan's trashily sexy style—even her lipstick is now red rather than pink. From a dependent, bored housewife, she has metamorphosed into a competent, independent woman who determines her own life, rejecting the past, and choosing a new path to self-fulfillment. *Desperately Seeking Susan* takes some pains to poke fun irreverently at bourgeois convention, especially filmic conventions that required the transgressive woman to be punished, marked as a fallen woman, condemned to death, or abandoned at the very least. We have already seen how *Rebecca* effects this *quid pro quo* twice over by both inflicting Rebecca with an inoperable cancer and causing her to be murdered. *Desperately Seeking Susan*, on the other hand, makes much of Roberta's dissatisfaction with her husband. Gary's sister accuses him of not satisfying Roberta sexually, to which he replies that she doesn't like sex anyways. There is a kind of loopy combination of romance, fantasy and humor in the film which has the 'knight-in-shining-armor who rescues the princess from the villain' played by a movie projectionist riding a restaurant delivery motor-bike. Once Roberta's sexual innocence has been established, it becomes a kind of running joke to have her accused of all sorts of sexual 'deviance,' including prostitu-

tion, lesbianism, and bird abuse. While she's jostled around between her husband, who treats her like an asexual child, and Dez, who thinks she's Susan and thus a 'femme fatale,' Roberta nevertheless manages to maintain her integrity and come out the winner.

It is important to note, however, that Roberta does not really become Susan any more than Joan Fontaine became Rebecca. But, unlike the 1940 film, *Desperately Seeking Susan* admits the possibility of an alternative to passivity as the only socially sanctioned position for a female to occupy. The attractiveness and desirability (to the protagonist) of the 'other woman' is not undercut by some ghastly revelation about her true, i.e. corrupt, nature, so integral a part of the moral structure of *Rebecca*. Neither Susan nor Roberta are punished for their (sexual) transgressions. The message here is clearly the antithesis of that of *Rebecca*, for it presents the active role as a positive alternative for women without any concomitant loss.

\* \* \*

The question never posed is precisely the one which would overthrow the whole (sanctioning) construction: 'Why did I like this film (I rather than another, this film rather than another)?'

Christian Metz<sup>9</sup>

**I**N THIS SHORT PAPER I HAVE TRIED TO INDICATE the reasons for my moments of pleasure while watching *Desperately Seeking Susan*. This is not to say that there aren't some problems inherent in the film, nor that it is truly radical in its position towards women. Too much of the film is couched in fantasy and tinged with romance to effect a real break with traditional women's pictures. Too much of the protagonist's dissatisfaction is felt but not articulated, passively conveyed rather than actively expressed. However, I feel that *Desperately Seeking Susan*, a film constructed as a 'classic realist text' within mainstream cinematic conventions, nevertheless opens up some spaces previously closed off to women, and, for that alone, it should be praised.

## NOTES

1. Susan Seidelman, *Film Comment*, June 1985, p. 20
2. See especially Mary Ann Doane, "Caught and Rebecca: The Inscription of Femininity as Absence," *Enclitic* 10/11, Fall 1981/Spring 1982, pp. 75-84.  
——— "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," *Screen*, vol. 23, nos. 3-4, Sept.-Oct. 1982, pp. 74-88  
Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema' Inspired by 'Duel in the Sun' (King Vidor 1964)," *Framework*, Summer 1981, pp. 12-15.  
Griselda Pollock, "Dossier on Melodrama," *Screen*, vol. 18, no. 2, Summer 1977, pp. 105-113.
3. Mulvey, op. cit. p. 13
4. Pollock, op. cit. p. 112
5. Doane, 'Film and Masquerade,' p. 20
6. Susan Seidelman, *Film Comment*, p. 20
7. Tania Modleski, "Rebecca as Female Oedipal Drama," *Wide Angle*, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 40.
8. Doane, op. cit. pp. 81-82.
9. Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 2, Summer 1975, p. 23



# Madness, pleasure & transgression:

by Bryan Bruce

**W**HILE NOT HAVING ACHIEVED THE coherency of a genre, the Hollywood film that manages to produce a woman as its central figure of identification can be at least partially defined by two of its characteristics: the disruption and alteration of a narrative structure which has evolved as predominantly male-centred (both in its preoccupation with action and adventure, conventionally associated with male activity, and in the way this activity is conveyed, using narrative devices borrowed from 'masculine' ideology which discourage the open or alternative reading of a film), and the strategies by which the female character operates in a male-dominated culture and its cinema. I want to concentrate on *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (Richard Brooks, 1977) as an example of the woman-centred film partly because it has been widely misread as critical of 'perverse' sexuality (specifically, female promiscuity and male homosexuality), taking Freud's definition of the per-

verse as that sexual practice which has resisted organization by the dominant ideology, heterosexual monogamy, exclusive genital eroticism, etc., and partly because the film demonstrates that a not atypical classical Hollywood text is capable of presenting coherently a positive female point of view by undercutting its own narrative order without discrediting its validity as an artistic form. As a preface I shall discuss several relatively contemporary woman-centred Hollywood films which exemplify the adaptability of classical narrative in its presentation of female characters and the strategies these women adopt within that context.

Clearly, only a few contemporary Hollywood directors have developed a narrative style which has proven sufficiently open (or perhaps more frequently, sufficiently incoherent) to allow female characters to express themselves, if only in conflict with or opposition to the authoritarian principles of patriarchal culture. Taking the auteur theory as a starting point (with its now obligatory qualifications, including the acknowledgement that film as a collaborative art cannot always be attributed to a single authorial presence, that there

## Looking for Mr. Goodbar



Diane Keaton as Theresa Dunne: exhibiting a child-like polymorphous sexuality.



are unconscious processes at work, and that Hollywood can be treated as an ideologically inscribed, capitalist industry with its own structuring principles), one can look at the films of certain directors that present a woman or women as the central character(s) and observe how these films are mediated by his/her previous films and narrative preoccupations. As an example, Robert Altman's treatment of female characters ranges from the stereotypical and exploitative (Sally Kellerman in *MASH* (1970)) to the eccentric (Shelley Duvall in almost everything, Ronee Blakely in *Nashville* (1975)) to the progressive and intelligent (Julie Christie in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), Lily Tomlin in *Nashville*). However, in his specifically women-centred films (*Images* (1972), *3 Women* (1977), *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982)), one can detect a consistency in narrative structure and character identity which can be related to other Hollywood films that feature women. The narrative of all three films, although remaining largely within Hollywood conventions, is at the same time idiosyncratic, structured by reversals, inversions, reflections, and disruptions which express the split and fragmented female characters; Altman's use of such motifs as twins, doubles, and mirror and water imagery (reflection, amorphism) allows him to express formally how women, if they fail to resist or reject entirely that patriarchal order which produces the unadulterated, reactionary classical narrative, are restricted by it to the illogical, the contradictory, the refractory. The female characters of these films, then, are either confined to schizophrenia or hysteria (Susannah York in *Images*) or find in this madness the freedom to form their own order and solidarity apart from patriarchy.

In *3 Women*, the interchangeability of the female characters (images of twins, the exchange of identities, role-playing—their shifting and tentative personae) is set in contrast to the rigid, masculine world, signified by guns and target practice (the phallic symbolic, characterized by accuracy, accountability, force) and western imagery (an allusion to classical Hollywood); the final killing of the male figure is followed by the creation of an order that, while it mirrors the patriarchal one, can be read as the appropriation of the male symbolic as a means of relieving it of its power. In *Come Back*, the three women are also depicted as mad, fragmented, illusory, transitional (Mona/Sandy Dennis as the hysteric, Sissy/Cher with her false breasts, as the constructed feminine image, Joanne/Karen Black as the transsexual) in opposition to the male icon, James Dean in *Giant*, the 'masculine' once again signified with reference to the Hollywood western, and depicted, alongside the 'feminine,' as an obvious product of social construction.

The women in both films form a solidarity in their common insanity, and by the end manage to exclude men completely; Willy/Janice Rule becomes the father figure symbolically in *3 Women* just as, in reverse, Joanne has literally changed her sex from male to female in *Come Back*, an example of sexual transgression as an escape from the male order.

Sexual transgression and madness as freedom are strategies that women have developed either to survive under patriarchy or to avoid its restrictions. The latter strategy has been the subject of numerous women-centred Hollywood films, and can be classified in various forms: the mad housewife (*Diary of a Mad Housewife* (Perry, 1970), *A Woman Under the Influence* (Cassavetes, 1974)), the delusional paranoic (*Images* (Altman, 1972), *Lilith* (Rossen, 1964)), the schizophrenic (*Sisters* (De Palma, 1973), *3 Women* (Altman, 1977)), the Hollywood star driven to insanity (*Inside Daisy Clover* (Mulligan, 1965), *Mommie Dearest* (Perry, 1981)), the

hysterical middle-aged woman (Joanne Woodward in *Rachel, Rachel* (Newman, 1968) and *Summer Wishes, Winter Dreams* (Cates, 1973). Hitchcock's *Marnie* (1964) is a perfect example of madness produced by and as a reaction against male hegemony, and also introduces crime as a strategy of defiance or escape (another example is Cassavetes' *Gloria* (1980)), which also finds expression in prostitution—the whore as independent, liberated businesswoman (*Klute* (Pakula, 1971), *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (Altman, 1971)).

There are several categories of feminist strategy which are less definitive, less willing to be identified: the female as child and/or the expression of childhood (polymorphous) sexuality (*Lilith*, *Marnie*, *Images*, *3 Women*, etc.), a further instance of the appropriation of a persona which allows the woman to circumnavigate patriarchy; and one of the most elusive expressions of otherness for the woman, the kook, the enigmatic, eccentric woman who combines elements of all the previous categories in a kind of bricolage—dabbling in theft, appearing mad or inscrutable to the male characters, using sex as a means to freedom or merely for pleasure—Maggie Smith in *Travels With My Aunt* (Cukor, 1972), Julie Christie in *Petulia* (Lester, 1968), and, finally, Diane Keaton as Theresa Dunne in *Looking For Mr. Goodbar*. The latter film incorporates numerous oppositional female strategies (Theresa is the criminal, the prostitute, the kook, the madwoman, the child, and the sexual transgressor, and escapes through fantasy, pleasure, and masquerade), and demonstrates most of the narrative tendencies by which they are ordered variously in the aforementioned films, including such devices as phantasy sequences, incoherent or achronological editing, methods of distancing, and the over-determined text.<sup>1</sup>

What follows is an attempt to demonstrate how *Looking For Mr. Goodbar* coherently organizes these feminist strategies; this will include reference to the way in which masculinity and femininity are signified, and to the issue of death and closure, which is particularly problematic with regard to this film.

There has been little work devoted to Richard Brooks as an auteur, and it is not my intention to initiate such an undertaking here. One can clearly draw comparisons between *Looking For Mr. Goodbar* and earlier Brooks films—*Elmer Gantry* (1960), with its emphasis on the evangelical passion of the female character, Sister Sharon Falconer/Jean Simmons, and its transformation into sexual pleasure, and the denunciation of religion; *In Cold Blood* (1967), with its verité style narrative and *film noir* influence, etc. More relevant for my purposes here is an examination of the narrative devices that Brooks, who adapted the film from the exploitative Judith Rossner novel, has taken, either intentionally or unconsciously, from other women-centred films.

Rossner's novel begins, significantly, with a confessional account by a young man of the rape/murder of the female protagonist (including the fucking of her dead body), obviously undermining our identification with her. In Brooks' film version, which has very little to do with the ethos of the book, we are consistently encouraged to identify with the heroine—so thoroughly, in fact, that her murder at the end of the film invariably leaves the audience confused and disoriented. Part of this strong identification can be attributed to the natural, sympathetic performance of Diane Keaton,<sup>2</sup> who is in virtually every scene, but it is also a result of the way in which Brooks structures the narrative. I shall

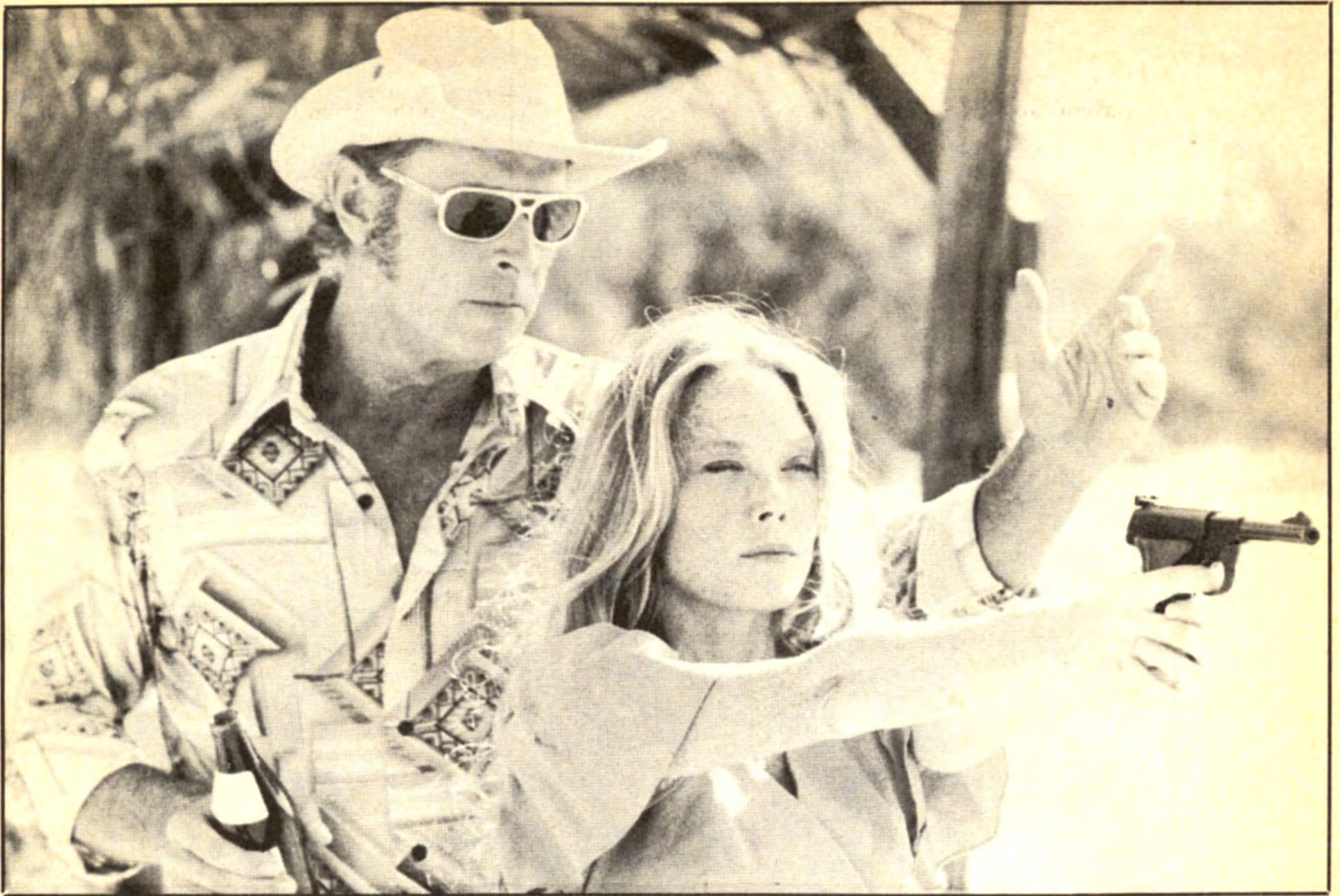
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Janice Rule as Willy in *3 Women*: reflection, distortion, amorphism.









Sissy Spacek in *3 Women*: appropriating the male symbolic.

now offer several points which contribute to this identification process:

1) *Fantasy/Expressionism*. On three different occasions in *Looking For Mr. Goodbar* we are presented with Theresa's fantasies as a natural extension of the plot so that we are unable to distinguish between her fantasy and the reality of the situation: a sexual encounter with her professor; her suicide by stepping in front of a moving car after being rejected by her professor/lover; and the police search of her apartment for illicit drugs. This serves to connect our responses to hers, to create the illusion that we are experiencing her consciousness. Similar disorienting devices involving female fantasies and dreams are used in *Summer Wishes*, *Winter Dreams*, *Rachel, Rachel*, and *Images*.

The film also incorporates expressionistic devices motivated in several instances by Theresa looking at her own reflection. She sees herself in a store window and we are shown her phantasy of being a famous figure skater; she looks in a mirror and in it we see her vision of herself kissing the professor. Hitchcock attempted several times to use expressionistic devices to depict the feelings of the heroine (*Blackmail*, *Marnie*), and Altman often uses mirrors and reflections to convey the perceptions of his female characters.

2) *Distanciation*. Like several post-classical Hollywood directors, notably De Palma and Scorsese, Brooks structures the film through a variety of narrative types (voice-over, montage sequences, fantasy sequences, the episodic, the use of black and white stills) and takes classical Hollywood narrative tendencies to their most extreme limit—the over-determination of cultural and symbolic references,

foreshadowing devices, symmetry, structural oppositions, etc. The obsessive use of such Hollywood modes of representation acts, arguably, as a technique of distanciation, mediated by the emphasis on the heroine and her gratification; the manipulateness of classical narrative and its patriarchal subtext (singularity and restriction of meaning, logical progression, the production of self-evident truths) are undermined by drawing attention to them, and we are free to celebrate, as the film does, female pleasure. Distanciation is also achieved through the use of redundant voice-over narration accompanying the montage in which Theresa tells the story of several of her sexual encounters, and through the interjection of a stills montage showing her ordeal as a child with polio.

3) *Narrative eccentricity*. There is a resistance in *Looking For Mr. Goodbar* towards the use of the establishing shot—scenes consistently begin as if already in progress and end abruptly—creating a feeling of disorientation. (This is analogous to the way in which Hitchcock, in several films, introduces his female characters in fragments, producing the establishing shot which establishes nothing (notably Tippi Hedren in *Marnie*), a formal expression of their elusiveness, their attempt to escape from the objectifying male gaze which insists upon unity and control.) This effect is also used in *Petulia* in which achronological editing and the fragmented juxtaposition of narrative lines serve as a representation of the title character's disorganized consciousness as she is put under anaesthesia (as we discover at the end of the film).

Brooks undercuts chronology by using for the credit sequence a montage of black and white stills (by Kathy



Fields) which anticipate the entire narrative, including shots of the murderer (Tom Berenger, who is not introduced until the latter part of the film), a further example of the disruption of narrative conventions which demonstrates the resiliency of classical forms—alterable not only in order to tell a woman's story, but also to interpret formally her struggle against the male control of representation.

4) *Mimesis*. Brooks reinforces our identification with Theresa by having her character become inseparable from the narrative; Keaton's quirky, eccentric performance is mimetic of the rapid, seemingly confused progression of the film so that it becomes, more forcefully, her story. The structural opposition of day/night to express the two worlds Theresa builds for herself (first grade teacher of deaf children by day, sexually promiscuous drug-using bar cruiser by night) is not only depicted formally (the conscious use of stark contrasts in cinematography, the abrupt transitions from dark night scenes to, for example, the white screen of a slide projector of a day sequence) but is also explicitly related to her character: James/William Atherton gives Theresa a strobe light (which is also brilliantly incorporated in the final horrific murder sequence) because it reminds him of her elusive, contradictory character—light/dark, on/off, hot/cold—contradictions, however, that she is able to sustain, and which are only problematic for the male characters who cannot figure her out. The film also moves towards a breakdown of the opposition of her alternating lives (for example, the transition from the day scene of her late arrival for class which ends with a siren in the background and the slamming of a desk by a pupil off-screen which sounds like a gun-shot, the intrusion of her 'criminal' identity), an indication of the insistence of patriarchy upon singularity of meaning, resolution of conflict, and logical explanation.

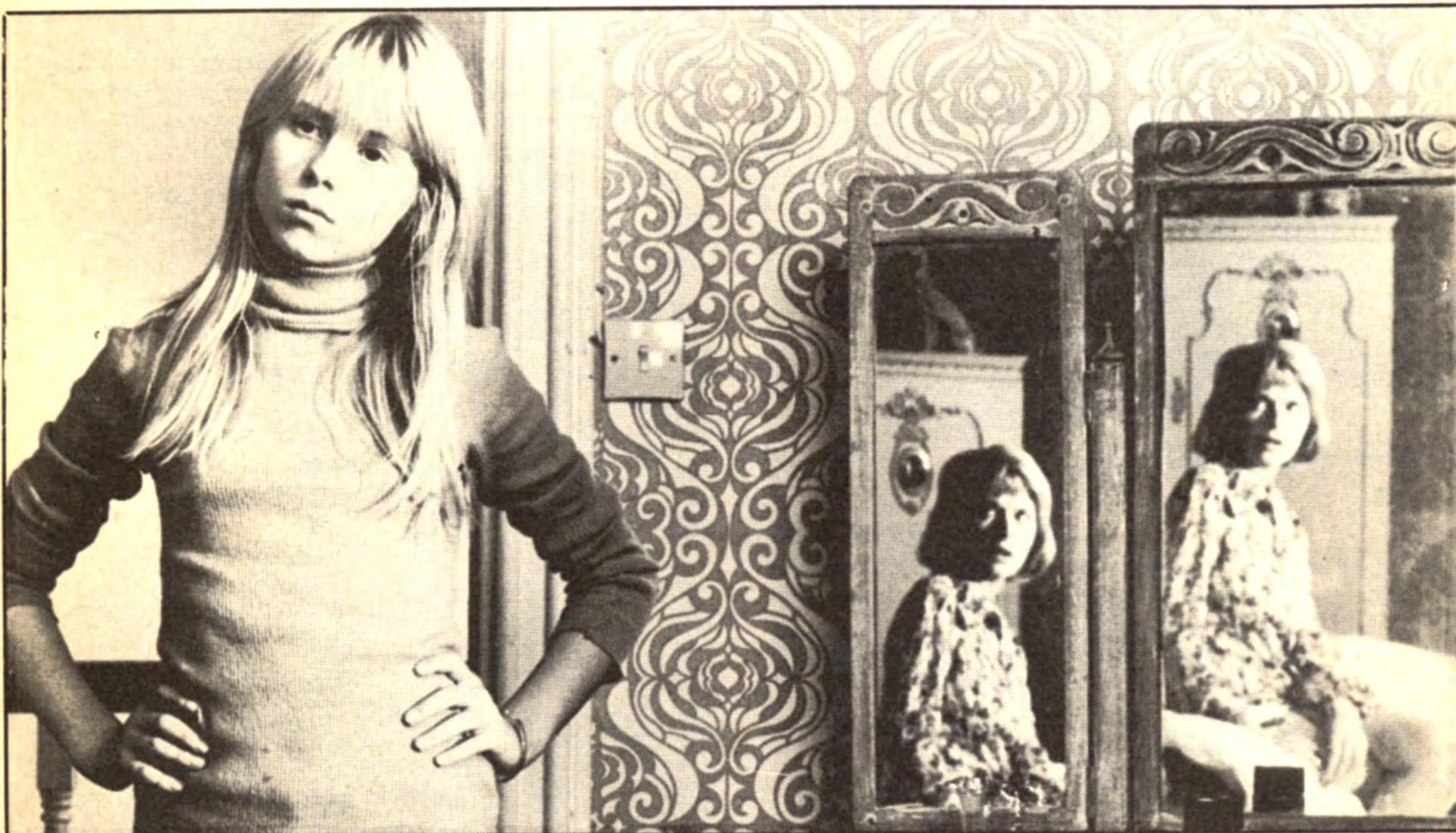
I have already enumerated some of the strategies used by female characters to subvert male control; I would like to elaborate on those specific to *Looking For Mr. Goodbar*, and

define how the masculine order is signified in the film.

Interestingly, religion and childhood, two of the institutions which western culture has set up as sacrosanct and wholly distinct from the sexual (which, along with the religious, is organized by patriarchy) are, in accordance with Freud, associated with sexuality in the film. Catholicism is dealt with ironically in its connection with sex, from the shot of the crucifix on the bare breast of a woman in the opening stills to Theresa's guilty vision, after an illicit act of love-making in a car, of a nun in the subway. Theresa's father (Richard Kiley) sustains all the possible contradictions which religion produces in its repression of sexuality; and his associations with sports, consumerism, and television in conjunction with his self-righteous denunciation of his daughter's sexual autonomy make him the perfect embodiment of American patriarchy.

Theresa's sexual awakening is inaugurated by her own story about her first confession, read aloud in class by her professor, which leads to the romantic fantasy and her job as his assistant and mistress. The loss of her virginity, conventionally depicted in Hollywood film as painful and traumatic for the female (and essential, meaningful, and unforgettable for the male) gives her nothing but pleasure, and her repeated appeals to God and Jesus, ironic in their excess, represent the beginning of her transition from the restrictive Catholic nuclear family to sexual and personal autonomy. When the professor tells her after the first time that she is now a full woman, she replies, "Thank God"; her sexuality from this point on will serve to maintain her freedom from patriarchal control (God, her father, the professor), not as a mystified, unspecifiable feminine *jouissance* connected to the passion of religion, but rather as a means of self-expression and, simply, pleasure.

Theresa's insistence upon sexual gratification unconnected to procreation leads to her decision never to have children, which she refuses to explain to the male doctor.



Images: reflection, the split, the child.





**Jane Fonda as Bree Daniels in *Klute*: the whore as liberated, independent businesswoman.**

Her reasons are over-determined by the narrative—the scene comes immediately after she has found out her older sister (Tuesday Weld) has had her second abortion; she is afraid that her own congenital polio will be passed on to her children. However, her renunciation of the child-bearing function is wholly consistent with her chosen lifestyle and underlines the emphasis on pleasure. When James urges her to have a normal family life, Theresa replies, “I don’t believe in the future—now—I believe in now”; in order to avoid the mandates of a repressive culture, its organization of female roles and identity, Theresa escapes by refusing to postpone her gratification, by an intensification of the immediate which is beyond the control of the male.

Theresa’s sexuality can also be interpreted as polymorphously perverse in that she experiences a complete and insatiable drive which no male character can satisfy (when a bartender, referring to liquor, says that one’s too many and a thousand’s not enough, Theresa replies, “I have the same problem with men”), and in her associations with childhood; the first time she goes to a bar, a man asks her if she is still in the first grade and she replies that she graduated today—her graduation both from her training as a teacher of the deaf and from her damaging relationship with the professor. Throughout the film Theresa maintains the curiosity and sense of play of a child, and allows her sexuality to spill over into her contact with children (she asks her infant nephew if he’ll be her ‘fella’), mostly through her expression of the physical and the sensuous with her deaf pupils. In one remarkable scene, Theresa’s practice of hand-signing in front of her mirror at home becomes erotic (“sorry—hungry—wish”), which is immediately followed by her initiation of masturbation by putting a pillow between her legs. Theresa, then, uses the physical as a strategy of escape—both sexually in her nightlife and, during the day, amongst the deaf children with whom she communicates sensuously and gesturally, outside orthodox male discourse. It is worth noting here that in *Lilith*, the title character (Jean Seberg), who escapes through madness, creates her own language and exhibits a polymorphous sexuality including an attraction to children, and is depicted as a child herself—precisely the tactics that Theresa develops, although less extremely as she operates outside the sphere of insanity.

Theresa is also posited as a child in her mischievous dabbling in the criminal. When James says it would have been easier to buy rather than steal a chocolate bar (supporting, like her father, who avidly watches “The Price Is Right,” the capitalist consumer system), she replies that it wouldn’t have been as much fun. She is also amused by Tony/Richard Gere’s attempted theft at the bar, and emulates his tough, street-wise character. Her use of cocaine is presented as satisfying her curiosity and sense of adventure, with the drug-dealer, Jesus, serving as another ironic aside to religion as savior (“I’m looking for Jesus”; “Didn’t you hear? Jesus got busted by the pigs”).

Although illness in cinema is perhaps less a feminist strategy than a reaction of women to their oppression, its manifestation as hysteria, particularly in the melodrama, qualifies it, at least, as a sign of unconscious rebellion. In *Looking For Mr. Goodbar*, Theresa’s childhood polio and the scar it leaves on her back (along with her neurotic dependence on aspirins) constitute an allusion to this symptomatology, and present her as the marked woman bearing the scar of castration.<sup>3</sup> However, the film, in keeping with its radical tendencies, allows the scar to become eroticized; it is not so much the signifier of lack as a metaphor for severance and difference. Theresa’s search for the phallus (as the title of the film



connotes) does not imply that she is incomplete or inferior to the male, or that she envies the penis or wants one of her own (she rejects the baby as its substitute), but rather, becomes a symbol of her own active sexuality and her autonomy through pleasure.

The other strategies that Theresa adopts, although somewhat liminal to the film, remain striking. Her masquerade in fantasy as a prostitute who turns to smile complicitly at herself while soliciting turns her own sexual pleasure onto herself (female narcissism as a method of subversion), and she regards her subsequent mistaken identity as a hooker, which she relates in voice-over, as amusing and fascinating (analogous to Bree Daniels/Jane Fonda's pleasure in masquerade and role-playing in *Klute* and, although not involving prostitution, to Tippi Hedren's enjoyment of masquerade and game-playing in *Marnie* and as Melanie Daniels in *The Birds*). Her identity as a sexual transgressor is less clear and finds its uneasy expression in male homosexuality.

Arguably, Theresa's sexuality is consistent with the expression of gay male sexuality which emerged most forcefully around the time of the film's release, and it is no accident that her 'cruising' leads her to gay bars (she is, in fact, taken to one by a man who, significantly, denies his own homosexuality). The emphasis on eroticism in gay culture is, as it is for Theresa Dunne, an expression of defiance, of the overwhelming rejection of the repression and taboo that is directed towards alternative sexual practice. Feminism and homosexuality are, ideally, politically commensurate, so it is not surprising that the film should culminate in the conjunction of the two terms. The violent ending of the film, in which a psychotic gay male murders a promiscuous female during the sexual act, is descriptive, not prescriptive; it is not a condemnation of Theresa's sexuality, but rather an indication of the way in which the oppression and resultant repression exerted by patriarchal culture promotes the mutual disruption and disorganization of oppositional factions. The gay character, confused by a system which has constructed him as homosexual and then punishes him for it (the queer-bashing sequence on Fire Island), directs his resultant violent impulses towards a woman who is, ironically, equally victimized, but whose identity as the 'correct' love object which he does not want causes him to blame her for his untenable position.

The movement of the film towards homosexuality is anticipated by the signification of masculinity, represented most clearly by Tony and James, Theresa's two most frequent male-love interests, who are set up in direct opposition to one another. James, as the hopeful successor to the role of Theresa's father, is the representative of the superego—he is a mother's boy who believes in the family; he is probably a virgin and is signified as feminine (and reacts violently when Theresa suggests he might not 'like' women); he is a civil servant and once intended to be a priest, adhering to government and religion as the institutions which the superego emulates; he is predictable, reliable, intelligent, and sensible. Tony, as the id figure, is the sleazy hustler and criminal who hates his mother (he says to Theresa, "You and my mother: the two biggest cunts in the world"), who lives off the system (he is on welfare) rather than becoming a part of it, who is masculine, and, as Theresa points out, thinks with his cock. Neither character can understand Theresa's oppositional and seemingly contradictory lifestyle (James refuses to believe that she is happy; Tony says, "The teacher of little kids cruising crummy bars—no wonder the country's screwed up"), and both attempt to disrupt the rules she has set up for herself—James by attempting to coerce her into the perpetuation of family life; Tony by imposing upon

her privacy and breaking her only house rule—visitors must leave by four in the morning. The film suggests both characters as the potential murderer (largely through *film noir* conventions), but produces, instead, the gay figure who represents the unsuccessful synthesis of the two poles of masculinity, of a rigidly defined superego which attempts to repress, unnecessarily harshly, the pleasure-seeking id. The result is the violent juxtaposition of the masculine and the feminine, the male character who masquerades as a female (in drag on New Year's Eve) and who expresses criminal tendencies not as healthy manifestations of revolt, as with Theresa, but as destructive impulses directed towards others. It is interesting that the film privileges homosexuality by presenting the sequence between the gay murderer and his older lover (in the pathetic masquerade of a sad clown) as the only one in which Theresa does not appear. It becomes the axis of the film, the point at which the contradictions which have been set up, and which Theresa happily sustains, conform to the conventions of closure and the pressures of patriarchal control.

Death as closure is a standard Hollywood resolution, but again, the fact that it is so extremely foreshadowed by the film (the references to Janis Joplin and Theresa's horrific self-portrait on the wall; the mock murder by her sister's boyfriend; the psychotic actions of James and Tony), and that it coincides with a violent sexual act, tend to undercut its conventionality. The use of the strobe during the rape/-murder perfectly realizes the culmination of all the contradictions and oppositions that Theresa has up to that point successfully manoeuvred. The ending can be read as an indication of the limitations of oppositional strategies: Theresa has decided to give up her double life because of the pressures of authority and the law; her access to pleasure is about to be denied; she can sustain the contradictions, but culture will not allow it. Theresa, then, has found a way of subverting the male order, and pleasurably, but only temporarily. As in so many other women-centred films, the masquerade, the fantasy, or the madness which defines the woman against, but still within, the restriction of patriarchy, leads inexorably to a choice between conforming to the system or being destroyed by it. *Looking For Mr. Goodbar* encourages us to lament this restriction of choice, and presents us with a character who, at least, finds exhilaration in her oppositionality.

## NOTES

1. Female strategies are not, of course, restricted to strictly women-centred films—one only has to think of Iris/Jodi Foster in *Taxi Driver* who finds refuge in fantasy, masquerade, childhood sexuality, etc. However, it is significant that Scorsese, while exhibiting some of the radical narrative tendencies I shall be discussing, does not use them to encourage identification with female characters, even in his specifically woman-centred film (*Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1975)).
2. It is significant that Keaton received her Oscar in 1977 not for *Looking For Mr. Goodbar*, but for Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*, a film in which her character is allowed to become independent only within the context of a man's story and point of view.
3. Diane Keaton's screen persona demonstrates an affinity to feminist strategy—from the hysterical illness and subsequent progression to criminality in *Mrs. Soffel* (Gillian Armstrong, 1985) to the role-playing and appropriation of masculine operations in *The Little Drummer Girl* (George Roy Hill, 1985).



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# Obsessions in the Melodrama: Amy Jones' *Love Letters*

by Florence Jacobowitz  
& Richard Lippe

**T**HE LAST DECADE HAS PRODUCED A proliferation of films dealing with the initiation of the son into patriarchy; the youthful protagonists take on the role of the father both in terms of their position within the family and in terms of privileged roles in society. Some of the most popular films of this decade, like *E.T.*, the *Star Wars* trilogy, *An Officer and a Gentleman* and *Ordinary People* re-enact these power struggles.

The celebration of male authority within the nuclear family has become a familiar ritual in the Hollywood cinema, and some critics have theorized<sup>1</sup> that this endless re-affirmation of the male's position is a direct result of the various threats to it which have arisen in the last 10 years, in the form of both the women's and gay liberation movements. Although a number of Hollywood films have addressed some of these concerns in a diluted form (for example, *An Unmarried Woman*, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, *Making Love*) sexuality outside socially-defined parameters of 'normality' remains threatening and is suppressed, receiving little if any recognition in the mass media.

Traditionally, the representation of female needs, female sexuality and the woman's place in the family has been addressed in the melodrama, which saw its heyday in the '40s and '50s; the melodramas which have resurfaced in the '80s, like *Terms of Endearment*, insist with a vengeance upon the woman's subordinated position. Unlike the classical melodrama, in which the female protagonist is often shown to be trapped within a social system which oppresses her, many of the '80s incarnations of this genre present the woman as being complicit in maintaining her socially-defined position as wife/mother and finding complete fulfillment within these limited roles. Debra Winger is an example of a contemporary star whose image has been conscripted to promote the entrenchment of this position. In *Terms of Endearment* Winger's status as wife/mother sanctifies her much-milked death, elevating the protagonist and her representation of the woman as madonna/martyr beyond criticism.

There have been sporadic attempts to explore the experience of female sexuality and identity within the conventions of the melodrama. Interestingly, these films were produced on the periphery of mainstream Hollywood and, given limited distribution, have received little recognition either commercially or critically.<sup>2</sup> Leaving aesthetic merits aside, our contention is that in a medium that depends on familiarity, most films that treat domestic issues from a

female sensibility by definition remain inaccessible to an audience weaned on male conflicts. This may explain why so few Hollywood films address the construction of female identity and the Oedipal trauma of the female having to reject permanently the mother's love along with deep emotional or physical affection towards other women. Inevitably, when mainstream cinema does present a mother-daughter relationship, it is treated within a framework directed towards the recuperation and validation of these losses as necessary to the continuance of the family as the viable social unit. The most classic example of this is *Mildred Pierce*, which many feminists consider seminal in its treatment of women's frustrations both within the confines of the family and the social and economic world. *Mildred Pierce* is a variant of the maternal melodrama, and like *Stella Dallas*, *Imitation of Life* and *The Reckless Moment*,<sup>3</sup> largely focuses on the mother's sacrifices and her inability to successfully fulfill the parental roles which she has undertaken. Most often, these films dramatize a strain between mother and daughter which can only be resolved through male intervention.

Much less frequently, the emphasis within the mother/daughter relationship is shifted to the daughter. One can discern a pattern which emerges and is repeated in these films. The daughters become progressively less able to cope with their roles, and this inability is manifested through neurotic behavior and/or mental illness. In *Now Voyager*, Charlotte Vale/Bette Davis succumbs to a complete nervous breakdown as a result of her overbearing mother's insistence on repressing Charlotte's identity as a sexual being and denying her independence.

Although these issues are crucial to the narrative, *Now Voyager* suggests that complete mental recuperation is not problematic if one happens to know a good psychiatrist.<sup>4</sup> *Marnie* presents a much bleaker view of the possibilities of a 'cure.' Marnie/Tippi Hedren's neurosis is depicted as being linked to a childhood trauma wherein she unwittingly kills one of her mother's male customers. As a result, Marnie is unable to develop into a 'normal' adult woman. She continues to demand her mother's affection and consideration which she is denied, and remains unresponsive to male attention. A superficial reading of Marnie's neurosis suggests that her behavior is a result of this childhood experience, which both she and her mother have repressed, and that a 'reliving' of the traumatic experience will cure her. On the other hand, the spectator is invited to understand that Marnie's 'trauma' precedes the murder of the sailor and is linked to her close relationship with her mother and her unwillingness to accept the loss of maternal love (which all little girls must accept because of parental/social conditioning) and move on to the



'father' as a love object and figure of authority. The film's suggestion that Marnie is 'cured' by Mark Rutland/Sean Connery is perfunctory and carries little conviction, given the preceding dramatization of her rejection of 'normality' as constructed by social law.

A number of recent contemporary films, including *Violette Nozière*, *One Deadly Summer* and *Love Letters*, are concerned with the kinds of themes *Marnie* addresses. In all three films the female protagonists: 1) empathize strongly with their mothers; 2) evidence desire to kill their fathers; 3) are associated with connotations and memories of themselves as little girls; 4) are aggressive and yet use their femininity as a means to an end; 5) take on lovers to re-enact their unsatisfiable relationship with their mothers; 6) embody contradictions concerning the way in which their identities as 'women' are determined by the social demands of gender roles, these contradictions being responsible for their mental breakdown; 7) manifest neurosis that takes the form of obsessive and fixated behavior.

Interestingly, in the European films, the women either remain paralyzed and cannot be re-assimilated or are re-integrated into society at the cost of their identity; in the Hollywood interpretation, e.g. *Love Letters*, there is a movement toward the protagonist's self-awareness which allows for a potential extraction from her neurotic identity. This may be attributed to Hollywood's and, by extension, America's insistence on the necessity to produce a positive resolution and to confirm the power and strength of individual initiative and survival.<sup>5</sup>

Of the three films mentioned, *Love Letters* remains the least well-known and stands as an anomaly both in terms of the issues raised and by the fact that it was conceived and directed by a woman, Amy Jones. In brief, the film centres upon Anna Winter/Jamie Lee Curtis, a young woman who discovers soon after her mother's death that the latter has had a secret love affair. The affair is uncovered when Anna finds a box of love letters sent by the lover, Joseph Chesley. Chesley has made a complete commitment to Maggie (Mrs. Winter) despite Mrs. Winter's marriage, her daughter Anna, and the distance that separates them. Anna becomes increasingly overtaken by Chesley's romantic vision as expressed in his writing; at the same time, she becomes involved in an affair with a married man, Oliver Andrews/James Keach, and parallels her experience with the one she reads of in the letters. The letters motivate Anna's responses to the point where she is unable to separate the two experiences.

Although *Love Letters* is constructed as a flashback depicting the affair between Anna and Oliver, as Anna herself claims in voice-over narration towards the film's opening, "It began then as it ended now . . . with Mama." Anna's declaration underlines the crucial link between her emotional commitment to both her mother and her affair with Oliver. As in the tradition of the melodrama, the romantic love object often represents something else which is desired, yet unattainable. For example, in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, Lisa's conception of Stefan and her all-consuming commitment to him can be read as her repressed desire for power, creativity, class mobility, independence, i.e., all that is denied her as a woman within a very male-privileged world. Similarly, Anna's attraction to taking part in an affair like that of Maggie Winter's reflects her unwillingness to let go of her mother. Arguably, the energy propelling Anna's romantic feelings for Oliver can be read as a displacement of Anna's repressed love for her mother.

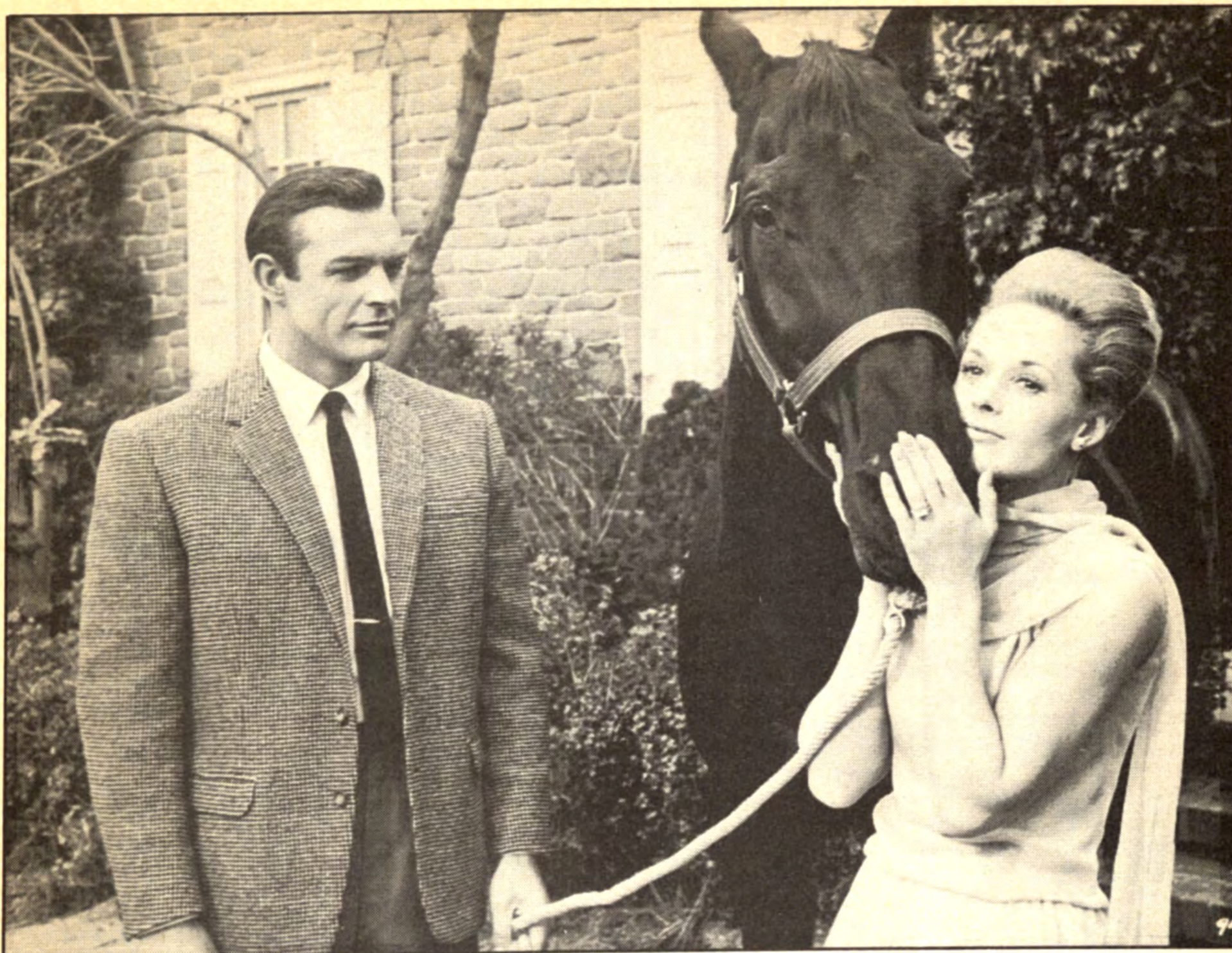
This reading of the film is strongly supported by the way the narrative is constructed and by the emphasis placed on

Anna's description of the way it "began"—the first scene of her memory of the relationship with Oliver begins with Anna's memory of seeing her mother in the hospital. The scene starts with Anna's presentation of her mother's favorite flowers, gardenias, which Anna later discovers are favored because of their significance to Mrs. Winter's relationship with Chesley. Her mother responds to the gift of the corsage with the admission of her love for Anna, "Honey . . . you're the only thing in my life that's really turned out," and her advice, "Don't make the same mistakes as I did . . . you're much smarter . . ." She then proceeds to present an opal ring which Anna has never seen before. Anna, sensing its importance, asks, "Who gave it to you? . . . not Daddy"; her mother's silence confirms her suspicion and suggests that she is finally proclaiming her affair and its importance to her.<sup>6</sup> As Mrs. Winter passes the ring to her, Anna says, "I love you," and they embrace. The physical interaction between Anna and her mother is especially pronounced in light of the father's interruption which shatters the mother-daughter intimacy. Anna's almost hostile reaction and complete refusal of any sign of affection towards her father and her subsequent departure serves further to underline her resentment of his intrusion. The scene is constructed to convey a strong sense of a courtship and ritual, which, followed by the exchange of the ring, affirms the mother-daughter bonding. The scene ends with an over-the-shoulder shot from Anna's point of view at the door, of her father seated at the foot of the hospital bed, flipping through a newspaper or magazine. The shot foregrounds Anna's perception of her father's lack of interest and sensitivity. The entire scene, however, offers an alternative perspective on the familial tensions from that of Anna's. The father, by his very presence, is an obstacle to Anna's complete and total possession of the mother.

What is crucial to romantic love in the melodrama is the contradiction essential to its existence: it depends upon the impossibility of its fulfillment. For instance, in *Now Voyager*, *All This and Heaven Too*, *There's Always Tomorrow* and *Madame De . . .*, the love affairs are permanently blocked by the protagonist's existing marriages. Other obstacles which create and generate the conditions for romantic love include questions of class (*Ruby Gentry*, *Camille*), disease or death (*Camille*, *Dark Victory*, *Farewell to Arms*), the protagonist's self-imposed blindness to their situations (*Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Written on the Wind*), or distance and separation (*A Time to Love and a Time to Die*).

In *Love Letters*, Anna's perception of romantic love is only superficially fuelled by Oliver's marriage. It is more profoundly based on her inability to have the mother—a trauma reactivated by her mother's death. In the melodrama, inanimate objects stand in for the real object of desire which is, by necessity, absent—hence, the overvaluation of the flowers, the ring, the love letters.<sup>7</sup> Romantic love is inherently 'tragic' in the sense that it always implies a sense of loss—beyond the physical loss it suggests lost chances, lost opportunities, and disappointment with what one must ultimately settle for. Mrs. Winter not only verbalizes her sense of loss ("Don't make the same mistakes . . .") but internalizes her resignation which is represented through her physical deterioration and death. A recurrent theme of the genre is that the heroine's only escape and ability to express her rebellion is through physical self-destruction (*Anna Karenina*, *Madame De . . .*, *The Model in Le Plaisir*). Anna's rebellion (against her separation from her mother) is externalized onto her aggressive appropriation of the role of the





The investigation of a traumatized female sexual identity in Hitchcock's *Marnie*.

male lover. Yet she is determined not to repeat the mistakes that her mother's lover succumbed to. Anna's motivations, both conscious and unconscious, are complex; in addition to attempting to adopt Chesley's identity and improve upon his actions as revealed in the letters, Anna also hopes to redeem her mother's unhappy and wasted life (for which she is partly responsible as her mother's child).

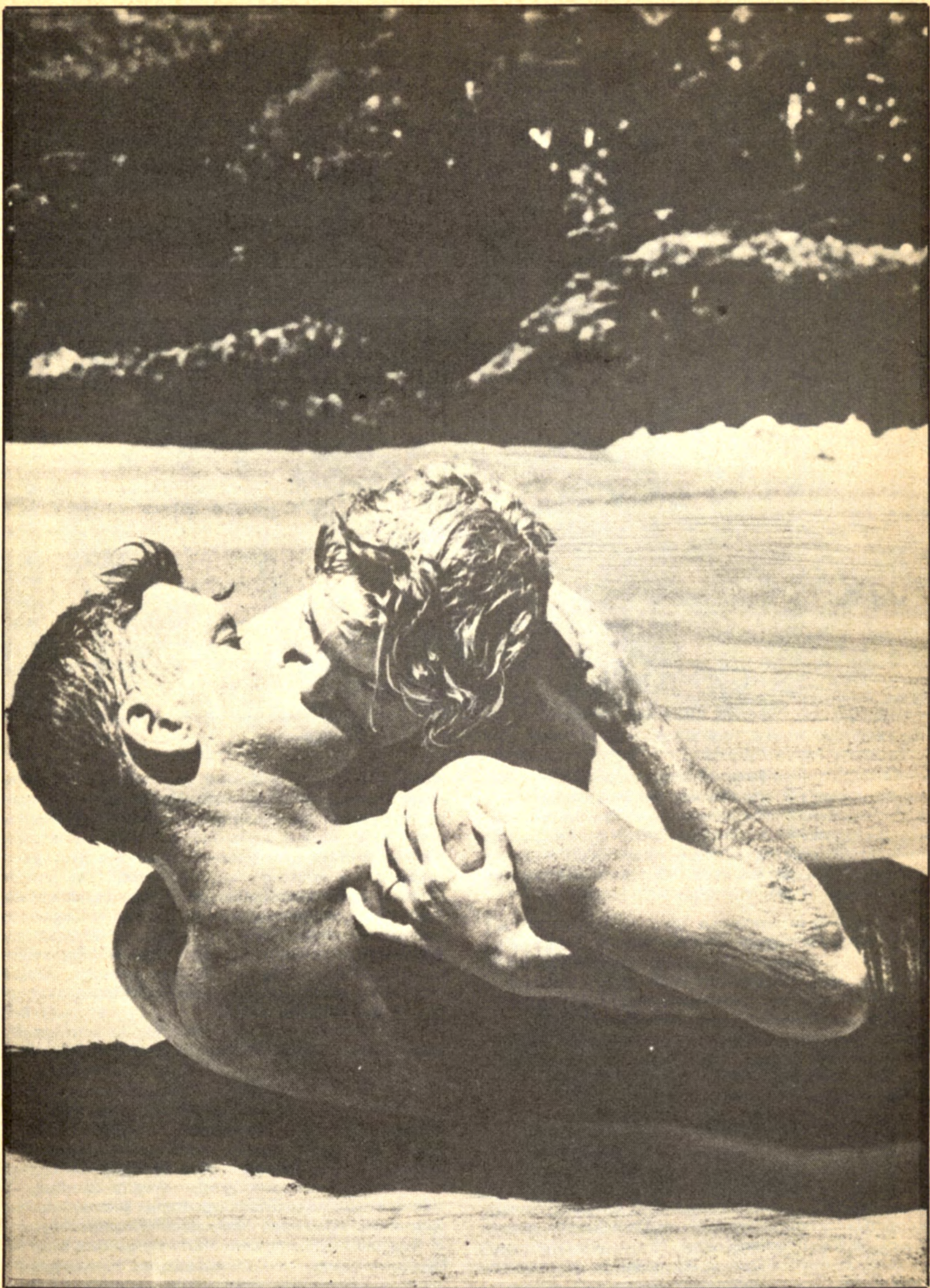
Anna desires to create an 'ideal' nuclear family; her intention to do so suggests that she is not rebelling against the concept of the nuclear family but, instead, blames her unhappiness (and her mother's) on the specific dynamics of the Winter family. Anna's attempt to compensate and rectify these failures causes her to seek out father figures. As her friend Wendy/Amy Madigan tells her, "This is a hang-up with you . . . father figures . . ." What the film demonstrates beyond the consciousness of the protagonist, is that it is not *her* father who is at the root of the problem but *the* Father.

The Father, no matter how kind, understanding or sensitive, will always remain an obstacle to the child. (Similarly, in marriage, *the* husband can never fulfill the requirements of the romantic lover.) The narrative structure reinforces the interchangeability of the father figures to Anna; Anna's violent breakup with Oliver is followed by a dream sequence wherein she shoots her 'real' father. This, in turn, is followed by Anna's burning of the love letters and her meeting the 'ideal' father, Chesley, at her mother's graveside.

Anna's resentment and hostility towards her own father seems excessive in light of what is shown of the character who is, at worst, pathetic and inept.<sup>8</sup> Mr. Winter himself is aware of his failure as a husband and a father; as he comments, "I was never good enough—not near good enough . . . your mother expected a lot." The father's admission of his limitations in fulfilling the demands of the husband/father figure are met with Anna's unwillingness to sympathize, or to address the realities of the situation. Repeatedly, when confronted by her father seeking to communicate, Anna withdraws and wants to escape. Anna's reaction to her father's display of physical affection suggests that her disdain is not justified by the circumstances. For example, following her mother's funeral, Anna reluctantly agrees to sleep over at her father's house, and is awakened in the middle of the night by Mr. Winter. He is drunk, and enters her room, saying, "Anna . . . I just wanted to tell you that I love you . . . I love you very much." The scene is shot from Anna's viewpoint and there is an ambiguous tension created between Anna's perception of her father's declaration and intrusion implying a sexual threat and the image of a pathetic lonely man seeking solace from his daughter.

Invariably, the significant melodramas demonstrate that these conflicts go beyond the character's circumscribed view of their individual situations and are a product of social structures at large, which affect both psychic and cognitive behavior. The interplay between conscious and unconscious







motivations is foregrounded through the film's use of memory and dream. In fact, 'subconscious' experience is given prominence in the narrative.

The narrative begins with a prologue in which a gunshot is heard, followed by the image of Anna awakening in bed. She peers out her window toward the cottage next door before entering the kitchen to destroy the love letters on the stove burners.<sup>9</sup> The credits and Anna's narration of events begin over the burning of the letters. The significance of the prologue is later revealed in the film's climactic moments when Anna's dream is visualized. Voices of Anna's parents quarrelling ("Don't touch me . . . you're drunk") are followed by a shot of Anna (as an adult) descending the staircase in a nightgown. There is then a shot from her point of view of the parents quarrelling, and it is clear that the argument is about the mother's refusal to have sexual relations with the father. The following reverse shot is again of Anna, however it is Anna as a young child. Her father turns to her, saying, "You're so like her . . ." (a comment he has made earlier in a scene with Anna at his home after she has recoiled from his touch) and points a gun at the child. The young Anna approaches the father, takes the gun, aims it at him and fires. The scene is significant in that it a) foregrounds Anna's desire to kill the father and b) reinforces Anna's intense identification with her mother.

The prologue's opening gunshot followed by Anna awakening frames the narrative within her unconscious desire to remove the father in order to claim the mother. The interchanging shots in the dream sequence of Anna as an adult and Anna as a child underline the subconscious ties between Anna's present conflicts and her childhood traumas. Anna's childhood presence as a witness to her parents' conflicts is paralleled in several scenes where she watches the violent arguments between the couple who live in the cottage next door. At one point she explains her voyeuristic fascination to her lover, Oliver, and claims that one night, during one of their fights, the woman shot her lover and went to jail. The next day the couple were reunited to continue their love/hate relationship.

It is significant that Anna's final breakup with Oliver follows a major quarrel she overhears him having with his wife over their affair. Anna, having injured herself earlier in a physical confrontation with Oliver, wakes up confused and disoriented in Oliver's son's bedroom. She staggers downstairs (a shot which echoes the dream) and apologizes for having been the source of familial discord. These images of conflict within family/love relationships clearly haunt Anna, and by contrast, elevate her mother's love-letter relationship with Chesley above and beyond the "everyday world of toothaches and Chevrolets" that Chesley admits cannot exist for them.

The film's casting of Jamie Lee Curtis visualizes the tensions between the independent, adult young woman, the unsatisfied child and the voluptuous mistress. Curtis, on the one hand, projects a strong sense of assertion and resiliency. Physically her 'natural'-looking face and boyish haircut contradict her full-figured body. At the film's outset, Anna Winter is presented as a popular radio disc jockey and gives the impression of being a woman who is in control of her identity. Progressively Anna's incoherent personality begins to reveal itself. Her own narrating voice-over, reading segments of the letters, is interchanged with Chesley's (i.e. the

male) narrating voice. Anna then begins appropriating segments of Chesley's words in her conversations and in her written letter to Oliver. She is unwittingly taking on aspects of Chesley's personality and position as a male lover conducting an affair with a married person.

Soon after Mrs. Winter's death, Anna is given the opportunity to act out and construct a romantic/phantasy love affair which she knows, from the start, is impossible. Unlike romantic love, which depends upon idealized courtship and deferred gratification, Oliver makes it quite clear from the start that he is married and, in addition, that his attraction to Anna is primarily sexual and physical. During one of their initial meetings, Oliver, who is a professional photographer, invites Anna to his studio and insists on taking her picture. Oliver begins by saying, "I don't want to be forward, but . . ." and proceeds to undo Anna's shirt buttons, immediately objectifying her. Oliver's actions continually undermine his professed admiration and regard for Anna as a successful professional. Although visibly uncomfortable, and despite her later admission to her friend Wendy that she sets herself up for punishment, Anna proceeds with her involvement.

The film's construction alternates scenes of Anna and Oliver together with images of Anna reading the love letters at home. This juxtaposition serves to foreground the gap between the myths of romantic love in which Anna is indulging and Oliver's perception of the relationship, which is a purely sexual one and non-threatening as long as it doesn't interfere with his marriage and family. Anna's fascination with romantic love is reinforced by society's propagation of these myths through popular culture. This is acknowledged in the scene where Anna and Wendy go to see *From Here to Eternity*. Significantly, the scene that is isolated is the famous love-making scene between Deborah Kerr and Burt Lancaster which takes place on the beach. (Kerr plays a married woman having an affair with Lancaster.) *From Here to Eternity* epitomizes the glamorization of romantic love inherent in patriarchal culture. The myth is dependent upon the strict regimentation of sexuality, wherein 'transgressive' sexuality is relegated outside of the marriage (in either illicit sex or idealized love) and desexualized relations are institutionalized within the domestic sphere.

Although one empathizes with Anna's position and understands the sources of her oppression, the film distances the viewer and offers a perspective on the affair that Anna cannot encompass. Anna changes from a sought-after professional (she refuses a job offer from a San Francisco radio station which would be a considerable promotion) to a housebound mistress. Pointedly, Anna's radio program is entitled "Obsessions in Music" which subtly alludes to underlying drives motivating her behavior. She is shown spending less and less time at her work-place, and more and more time within the confines of her home, waiting for the telephone to ring. Oliver's perception of Anna's role is that of the mistress and muse who should be available for his sexual pleasure. His gift of the piano, ironically related to her work, becomes another potential means of controlling Anna's identity as the ideal mistress. Anna becomes an additional possession for Oliver, to be displayed to his male friend. This is evidenced following the restaurant sequence, where Oliver is clearly pleased that his friend is envious of his affair; the moment is followed by Oliver's sudden fear and embarrassment. Oliver, taking Anna back to her home, insists that she quickly duck down because his wife's friends, who have passed by the car, may have seen him with another woman.

The sequences of Anna and Oliver's lovemaking are totally devoid of sensuality or tenderness. Instead, the scenes

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The beach scene in *From Here to Eternity*: romantic passion eroticized in the classical cinema.



depict a physical brutality which Anna seems to endure more than enjoy. The dual perspective of the affair that the film offers is brilliantly achieved in the sequence where Oliver is photographing Anna nude in bed. The scene begins with a full-frame shot of an empty sheet, accompanied by a voice-dialogue between Anna and Oliver. The dialogue consists of Oliver commenting on the shots, "Stay very still . . . it's too hot . . . too much tit . . ." and Anna's responses, "Enough . . . Are we finished?" by isolating the succession of polaroid shots tossed onto the sheet, Jones is indicating to the spectator that this is Oliver's point-of-view. The *Playboy*-like shots of Anna solidify Oliver's image of her. This image sharply contrasts the way the director otherwise photographs Jamie Lee Curtis. Although there are several scenes where Curtis is filmed nude or undressed, she is never shot in a manner that offers her body for the spectator's voyeuristic pleasure. The sequence works to distance the spectator and allows one an awareness that Anna lacks; she ignores the implications of Oliver's demands. The scene ends with her request that he "take off (his) wedding ring . . . just for an hour." In contrast to Oliver's self-serving pleasure, Anna's unhappiness is attributed to Oliver's insensitivity to her needs; while Anna is willing to indulge Oliver's desires, she wants to be recognized and privileged as his 'true' love.

Although Anna plays the role of the acquiescent mistress (which is the 'feminine' position) she, in fact, takes an active role and is complicit in directing the course of events. Because Anna identifies with both the mother and, unconsciously, Chesley, one can understand Anna's assertive behavior to be in line with the young girl's unwillingness to relinquish her active 'phallic' sexuality for the social requirements of passive 'feminine' behavior. Anna's 'active'-ness and her adoption of Chesley's persona can be read as her unconscious rebellion against social demands of gender

orientation. It is interesting that one of Chesley's lines for which Anna shows a particular affinity, and singles out in her letter to Oliver, is his "I'm sick of my life and its intolerable contradictions." Her aggressive behavior is out of context with the role she takes on as the obedient mistress who must wait for Oliver's phone calls to set up their meetings.

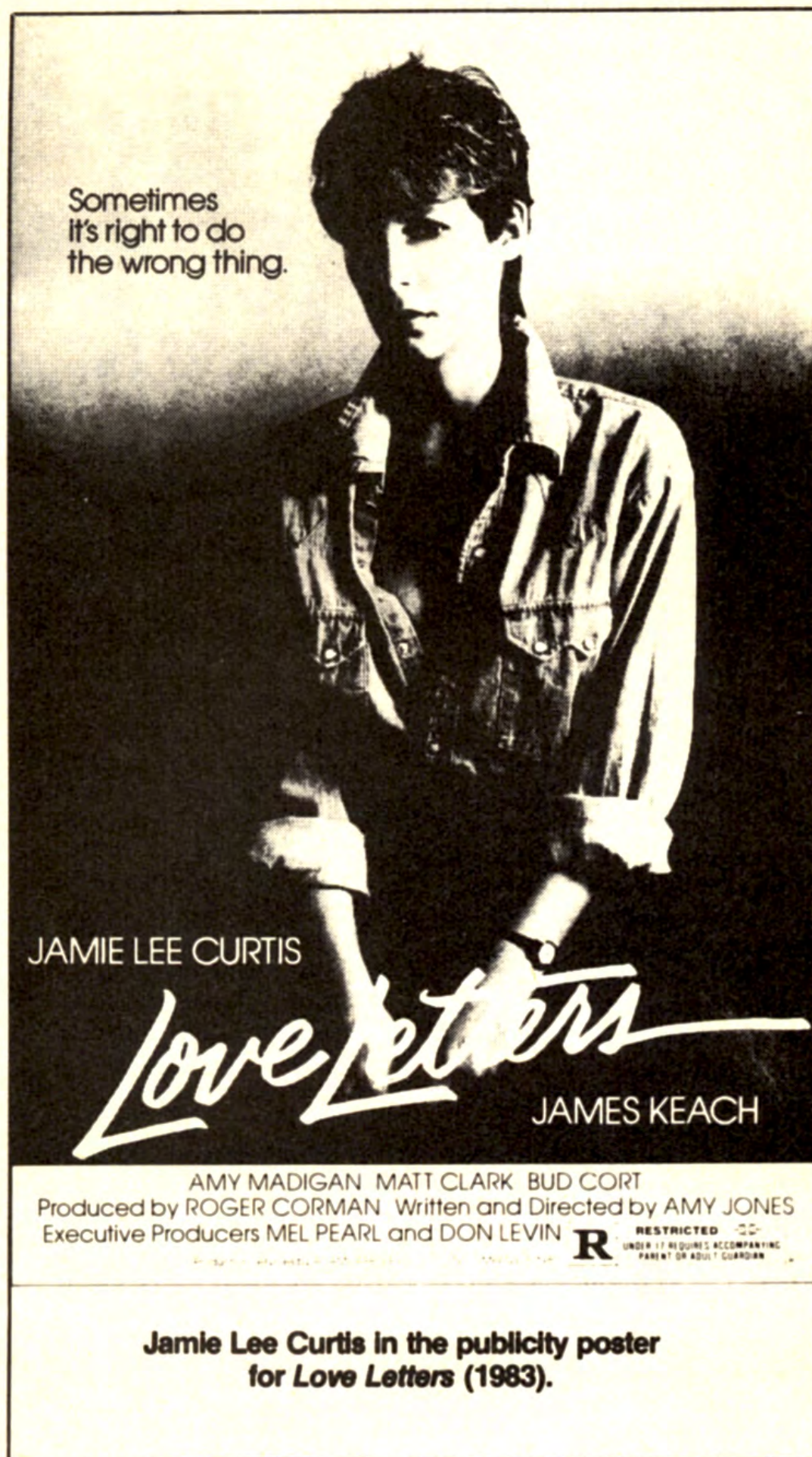
The active tendencies

Anna embodies are dramatized in the various scenes wherein she spies on Oliver and his family. The act of voyeurism, culminating in her trespassing the grounds of the Andrews' home and forcing a confrontation, indicates Anna's desire to control the outcome of the fantasy she has carefully constructed.

In order to play out the fantasy, Anna must masquerade as the compliant mistress. In the first of a series of climactic scenes leading towards the breakdown of their relationship, Anna, desperate to see Oliver, prepares herself for the visit by dressing in a full slip and applying heavy make-up to her drawn and haggard-looking face, concealing the drain the affair is taking on her health. The effect strongly contrasts with earlier images of Anna in which she is never heavily made-up and is always dressed in casual clothing. Anna's deterioration is visible and reflects her progressive physical and mental breakdown.

Anna's costume implies her perception of her role as the sexually-arousing female. The scene encapsulates the contradiction between what Anna hopes to

achieve in the sense of an all-encompassing commitment to the romantic lover and what the affair actually entails. When Oliver arrives at the apartment he resists Anna's sexual advances and finally admits that he has just made love to his wife. Anna's emotional response culminates in an hysterical outburst wherein she challenges Oliver to leave his wife, if not physically, then emotionally, and to profess his undying love for her. While Anna needs and demands an emotional commitment, her declaration of her feelings and her hysteria begin to arouse Oliver sexually. He trivializes the signifi-



Jamie Lee Curtis in the publicity poster for *Love Letters* (1983).



cance of Anna's assertions by turning the entire encounter into a sexual game of power whereby he forces her to admit and say "I love you" and is aroused by her refusal to do so. The scene ends in a depiction of their violent intercourse which takes on the connotations of a rape.

The potential threat to Anna's vision of the 'romance' implicit in this confrontation leads her to re-evaluate Chesley's passive resignation. Instead, Anna decides to actively redirect her future with Oliver. In a conversation with Wendy, Anna describes Chesley's mistakes: "He should have forced her . . . they were so much in love." Wendy replies, "What difference does it make?" Anna is oblivious to the question and continues, "I know what to do . . . finally."

Anna's decision to force Oliver into openly recognizing their relationship and to choose between her and his family leads Anna to confront her romanticized phantasy. She articulates what the spectator already knows and what she has long denied—that her position was never that of the 'lover.' As she angrily says to Oliver, "What do you think I am . . . a fuck machine? . . . Turn me on, turn me off . . ." Her realization confirms what Wendy has told her before the affair began: all the relationship could offer was "being fucked."

Anna comes to an understanding and can reach the point where she can destroy the love letters. Her 'narrative' concerns the retelling of her relationship with Oliver—it begins and ends with the burning love letters. Essentially, then, Anna's story utilizes the conventions of the melodrama. As is often the case, the protagonist's relationship is doomed or impossible. In Jones' film, Anna's story is contained within the context of Anna's dream.

The dream sequence follows the breakup with Oliver and precedes the meeting with Chesley at the cemetery. It places the concerns of the melodrama, and of the myths of romantic love, within the context of the *family*. Anna's yearning for the ideal lover is rooted in the more fundamental conflicts which are part of the socialization process of female identity. This may account for the continuing potency of these kinds of stories.

In the film's final sequence Anna admits to never having experienced a love like the one shared by Chesley and her mother, but remains mystified about the possibilities and potential of one day finding the 'true' or ideal lover. The film's attitude to Chesley and to the concept of romantic love is very nostalgic: Chesley is presented as a non-threatening father figure. Chesley's sentimental gesture of placing a heart of gardenias around the gravestone, and his ability to break down and cry, situate him within the tradition of the feminized romantic lover who hesitates and acts too late: a male lover who still exists as an ideal.

Ultimately *Love Letters* is riddled with contradictions and is ambivalent in its attitude towards the possibilities of romantic love in a contemporary world. On the one hand the film serves to foreground the dynamics behind the myths of romantic love in a forceful and articulate manner. For instance, Jones photographs Anna and Oliver enjoying a romantic, sensual evening on the beach (culminating in their love-making) in a sequence which directly echoes the famous lovemaking scene in *From Here to Eternity*.<sup>10</sup> However, Jones' sequence ends with Oliver telling Anna to shake the sand off his jacket so that his wife won't suspect his infidelity. Jones parallels the images in order to defuse and deglamorize notions of romantic love as perpetuated through the cinema. On the other hand, the film hesitates to relinquish these entrenched myths.

*Love Letters* seems to imply that romantic love in the '80s has deteriorated into a mechanized physical ritual which entraps and objectifies women. The film retains its nostalgic longings for a time when love relationships included tenderness, mutual respect and consideration. Nevertheless, the film fails to separate the possibilities of humane non-sexist love relationships from patriarchal structures which have always oppressed women.<sup>11</sup> The Mrs. Winter/Chesley relationship remains esteemed and valued as a model. In other words, the film supports a romanticized version of the male/female relationships which it has worked to expose, yet can't quite let go of.

*Love Letters* raises crucial issues of sexual politics which demand the understanding of how independent, intelligent women like Anna continue to be trapped by Oedipal/patriarchal assumptions, yet the film remains caught within those same parameters. This failure to achieve complete coherence does not undermine the importance of the film; it testifies to the primal conflicts which underpin gender relations and their cultural representations.

## FOOTNOTES

1. See *CineAction!* #1, Spring, 1985, "80s Hollywood: Dominant Tendencies," by Robin Wood, pp. 2-6.
2. A few exceptions to this deserve mention: See, for example, *Mrs. Soffel* or *Six Weeks*. The position and tone of these films empathize with the woman's position without demanding recuperation by the film's conclusion.
3. We are making reference to both versions of *Stella Dallas* (Henry King's in 1925 and King Vidor's in 1939) and *Imitation of Life* (John Stahl's in 1934 and Douglas Sirk's in 1959).
4. Many films of the '40s and '50s present an American popularized interpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis. Many of these films optimistically suggest that the 'right' doctor can cure any mental illness. The emphasis is often placed on the sick or troubled individual as opposed to the social system which formulates the conditions leading to the breakdown. (See, for example, *Lady in the Dark*, *Spellbound*, *The Dark Mirror*, *The Snake Pit*, *Lizzie*, or *The Three Faces of Eve*.)
5. In both *Entre Nous* and, to an extent, *Une Semaine de Vacances*, the 'sick' female protagonist does manage to regain her well-being.
6. Maggie Winter, like, for example, Lisa in *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, reveals her affair because she knows she is dying.
7. Other example of objects which take on great significance to the protagonist in the melodrama include white roses in *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, the earrings in *Madame De . . .*, the fur coat in *Caught*, the music box in *There's Always Tomorrow*.
8. In both *Violette Nozière* and *One Deadly Summer*, the daughter's anger towards the father exceeds what seems justified by his portrayal in the film. He is never 'good enough' and fails to live up to the ideal.
9. Clearly, Amy Jones makes reference to much of the iconography of the melodrama, and, in addition, creates contemporary visual equivalents which suggest the woman's domestic space within the home. For example, Anna's burning of the love letters on the stove burners concisely makes this point. The film also employs elements of *mise-en-scène* found in traditional melodramas. Repeatedly, the characters are framed (and caught within) windows and doorways which isolate them, suggesting the emotional barriers between them.
10. See Brandon French's insightful reading of the film in her book *On the Verge of Revolt*.
11. Another direction that could be explored logically would lead the daughter/protagonist to a lesbian relationship. This is touched upon in *One Deadly Summer* although the film hesitates to support the alternative love relationship.





Kathleen Quinlan and Dianne Wiest: the 'grasshopper' scene.

## Firestarters; or, *Independence Day*

by Robln Wood

**T**he first time I saw *Independence Day* it seemed to me a broken-backed film: a trendy liberal-feminist main plot (the story about Mary Ann Taylor/Kathleen Quinlan) that took one little further than the general run of liberal-feminist, quasi-feminist, in effect *anti*-feminist Hollywood movies of the '80s, counterpointed by an absolutely devastating sub-plot (the story about Nancy Morgan/Dianne Wiest) that at once unbalanced the film and gave it its distinction, consigning the main plot to oblivion. Repeated viewings have greatly modified this first impression on two levels: a. The Mary Ann plot is far more interesting in itself than I gave it credit for; b. the two plots are far more integrated thematically than I suspected, being in fact intricately necessary to each other as counterpoint and mutual commentary. One is simply not used to such closely worked movies in the contemporary Hollywood context or in the context of the made-for-TV movie (the two are becoming increasingly interchangeable). *Independence Day* is an

extremely complex and audacious film: it belongs in every respect with the 'neglected films' of our first issue: distinction, oppositional quality, neglect. It was directed by Robert Mandel (his first feature film) from a highly intelligent screenplay by Alice Hoffman; I have not heard of either since.

To do the film justice I want to place it in a dual context: that of the contemporary 'liberal feminist' films discussed elsewhere in this issue by Scott Forsyth, and that of the classical Hollywood 'woman's film.' If by feminism we understand 'radical feminism' (feminism as rethought and redefined since the '60s), then we cannot strictly speak of the woman's films of the '30s, '40s and '50s as 'feminist.' However, the conventions of the genre (woman-centred melodrama) themselves guaranteed that the societal structures (economic, familial, ideological) within which women have been oppressed would be reproduced and made visible, whatever terms of closure (the 'happy ending') were imposed. The films therefore lend themselves readily to feminist appropriation, and in general the more intelligent and complex the



film the easier the act of appropriation: the resistance to feminist appropriation of films like *Blonde Venus*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and *Ruby Gentry* is minimal and easily penetrated, they seem today to invite a feminist reading. Most contemporary 'liberal feminist' films, on the contrary, resist appropriation by any serious form of feminism almost totally. *Flashdance* can stand as a salient example. The film informs us that today a 'liberated' woman can be (a) a welder, (b) a dancer, (c) an object for the male gaze, (d) a wife and (e) upwardly mobile (she marries her boss), all at the same time. The upward mobility is—tactfully—not stressed, class relations being thoroughly mystified throughout the film, as they are in general across the whole spectrum (such as it is—from A to B, one might say) of contemporary Hollywood cinema. Co-option could scarcely be carried further, though the cost is the film's total, relentless vacuity. The societal structures of women's oppression are now either denied effective existence (women are 'liberated,' as in *Flashdance* or the familiar Virginia Slims advertisement—'You've come a long way, baby' could be *Flashdance's* motto) or so thoroughly mystified that their oppressiveness appears negated (*Terms of Endearment*).

One should not of course lose sight of the constraints within which the classical woman's films operated and which in fact made them possible. Roughly, they could produce (on whatever level of intentionality) the most thorough and devastating analyses of the oppression of women; what they could not do was dramatize practical alternatives (which could only be political). Sternberg's extraordinary *Blonde Venus* admirably exemplifies the potentials pushed to their most extreme. In order to understand the film it is necessary to recognize that in it Dietrich does not play a 'character.' At the beginning, in the celebrated crypto-lesbian prologue (understandably cut from most prints when the Hays code became enforced), a group of women, Dietrich among them, disport themselves naked in a pool. It is the only time in the film when we are permitted to feel confident in interpreting how Dietrich is feeling (the only time we know she is happy), but this is shown not in terms of individual psychology ('character') but of group activity—women enjoying their bodies, their togetherness, their freedom, outside male definition. The sequence has an idyllic quality, existing outside any definable time and place, outside society. Immediately, the idyll is shattered by the intrusion of the male gaze, registered as unwarranted, presumptuous, arrogant and destructive: a remarkable reversal of the Garden of Eden myth, with *man* bringing sin into paradise. With paradise lost, Dietrich enters patriarchal culture, a figure passing through a male-dominated, male-constructed world trying on the available female roles like dresses that never really fit: woman as wife, woman as mother, woman as spectacle, woman as mistress, woman as prostitute; finally, woman as 'masquerader,' the adoption of male attire associated here (as subsequently in *The Scarlet Empress*) with the systematic denial or perversion of all properly 'human' qualities and impulses in the interests of power.<sup>1</sup> Dietrich is not a 'character' because we are consistently denied access to what she is thinking and feeling. Her delivery of lines (note especially the two occasions when she says 'I love you,' once to Cary Grant and once to Herbert Marshall) is exemplary in its Brechtian distancing ('Actors should speak as if quoting'). Each episode in the film, including the most hideous of all Hollywood's 'happy endings,' becomes, instead of a development in a psychological study, a Brechtian lesson in the oppressiveness of male-constructed women's roles.

The conventions of the woman's melodrama permit

(indeed, encourage) the analysis of the oppressiveness of patriarchal heterosexual relations, but not their rethinking: 'masculinity' and its mystique must not be overtly threatened. The leading male characters in the great woman's melodramas tend to be not so much feminized as nullified: hence the habitual casting of bland, non-charismatic actors like George Brent, Herbert Marshall and John Lund. Andrew Britton has argued persuasively, however, in his book on Katharine Hepburn and his monograph on Cary Grant,<sup>2</sup> that such a rethinking—the breakdown of traditional gender-roles, the construction of non-oppressive, non-patriarchal heterosexual relations—is licensed within the conventions of the comedy (*Holiday*), especially the screwball comedy (*Bringing Up Baby*, *The Awful Truth*), and the musical (*The Pirate*). The condition in this case is very clear: the films (*Holiday* a partial exception) must signal strenuously that they are not to be taken seriously, that they are 'pure escapism.' (Insofar as 'pure escapism' expresses the desire to escape from oppressive structures and create alternatives, it is obviously a salutary artistic mode).

It is part of the distinction of *Independence Day* that it brings together these two projects, relegated in classical Hollywood to treatment within discrete genres. The Nancy story is in direct line of descent from the classical woman's melodrama, and it is perhaps the richness and strength of its heritage that permits it such force and conviction. If the Mary Ann story is more tentative, less confident of itself, less cogently realized, this may be partly because it does not have so sustained and established a tradition to draw sustenance from. The film develops its two plots in a structure of oppositions, stylistic, thematic and formal: the Nancy plot is entirely serious in tone, the Mary Ann/Jack Parker (David Keith) relationship (while far removed from anything that could be called 'screwball') continually hovers on the verge of the comic; the Nancy plot is about a woman who never intellectually questions her subordination and dependency, the Mary Ann plot is about a woman who consciously asserts her independence; the Nancy plot ends in an image of fire (the blazing house), the Mary Ann plot in an image of water (the stagnant swimming-pool). The opposition extends to quite small details: Mary Ann casually invents other names for herself with strangers with whom she doesn't wish to become intimate (it is her means of preserving and protecting her identity); Nancy, when Jack suggests she run away and take another name, is completely unable to think of one, although she hates her own (she has no identity left, it having been totally appropriated or nullified by the males who surround her, father, husband, children). I shall consider each plot in turn, and then examine their interaction, the ways in which each serves to modify our attitude to the other.

The Nancy story today invites direct comparison with the recent, widely celebrated TV film *The Burning Bed*. Both concern battered wives; both seek to analyze the circumstances wherein intolerable oppression is possible and even (at least temporarily) acquiesced in by the victim; both present a tyrannical, perhaps psychotic, husband as the immediate perpetrator of the brutalities, but also show how parents, conditioned by traditional views of male/female relations, contribute to and encourage the oppression; both move towards a denouement where the woman uses fire as her expression of revolt, in each case destroying her husband with it (in *Independence Day* herself as well); both link this with the possibility of insanity (Nancy has been under psychiatric treatment following an earlier suicide attempt, the heroine of *The Burning Bed* is acquitted of murder on





Dianne Wiest and Cliff de Young. Beaten by Jack for beating Nancy, Les prepares his revenge.

grounds of temporary insanity).

The twin motifs of madness and fire recur (often but not always in conjunction) throughout nineteenth and twentieth century fiction as women's responses to male oppression. Bryan Bruce has touched on the former in his article on *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*. Though it still occurs, it seems especially connected to the Victorian experience, linking (for example) *Lucia di Lammermoor* (the 'mad scene' became a convention of nineteenth century Italian opera) and *Gaslight*. In Cukor's splendid film (but neither in the original play nor in the inept British film version), it is the love duet from *Lucia* that Alicia/Ingrid Bergman is practising when she decides to abandon music and marry Gregory/Charles Boyer, thereby rejecting Donizetti's warning that men will drive her mad. **Madness can be seen as the passive response to oppression:** the woman's retreat into helplessness, into a condition where she can no longer control her actions or assume responsibility for them: Lucia, driven mad by the men's stubborn adherence to 'masculine' codes of aggression, domination and revenge, Alicia (her near-madness deliberately induced by her genuinely neurotic husband) ready to succumb to the temptation of real madness as an escape. But the passive response makes possible its active counterpart: *because* she is mad, Lucia can stab her brother to death; Alicia, in the film's magnificent climax, can *use* her supposed madness as the weapon of revenge. This active counterpart has been most frequently dramatized as fire. The most obvious source in the Victorian novel is *Jane Eyre*, in which mad Mrs. Rochester, on her first escape from her tower-prison, sets fire to her husband's bed, and finally burns down the house, blinding (symbolically castrating)

Rochester and immolating herself. In *Rebecca* it is not the wife who goes mad and starts the fire; yet it is clear that Mrs. Danvers burns down Manderley *for* Rebecca, as a direct outcome of the two women's symbiotic, crypto-lesbian relationship. **The double meaning of 'mad' in common speech (insane, justifiably furious) is apposite to both these cases, as it is in *Independence Day*.**

The supreme instance of the 'fire' motif (here decisively separated from insanity) is the closing scene from *Götterdämmerung*, the culmination of Wagner's 'Ring' cycle, which enacts quite explicitly the overthrow of patriarchy. Brunnhilde, betrayed by the machinations of men in their obsession with power and domination, kindles the flames of Siegfried's funeral pyre and immolates herself. The flames rise up to consume Valhalla and destroy the gods; the Rhinemaidens can then reclaim the ring of power, but in order to guard it, not use it. (It is high time that Hitler's appropriation of Wagner for Fascism was definitively challenged.)

Nancy Morgan is not Brunnhilde: she cannot bring down patriarchy. She merely destroys herself and her husband (hateful, yet so well understood by the film that he is also pathetic) leaving their children to the mercies of the social system and their oppressive grandparents. **The devastating effect of the catastrophe lies essentially in its being an act of total negativity: we are shown a woman so completely destroyed by the patriarchal organization that she can imagine no solution other than personal apocalypse.** Dianne Wiest's almost uncanny—and almost unbearable—performance<sup>3</sup> exactly conveys the sense of anomie, the surface acceptance of being a non-person without rights, the underlying turmoil of resentment, powerlessness and terror: her reaction to



Mary Ann's remark that she is not (as Mary Ann expected her to be) 'crazy' is 'You just can't see it—I hide it,' delivered with an extraordinary mixture of fear, self-deprecation, pride and pleasure. But if *Independence Day* is far superior to *The Burning Bed* it is not just because Farrah Fawcett isn't Dianne Wiest. *The Burning Bed* is severely limited by the conjuncture of two generally compromised and impoverished American forms that *Independence Day* transcends: the TV movie (in which artistic significance is reduced to simple point-making) and the 'social problem' film (in which the real social problems, which can't be solved without transforming the entire structure of patriarchal capitalist culture, are reduced to problems that can be). It is symptomatic of the difference between the two films that the oppressive parents of *The Burning Bed* are the husband's (hence motivated by a commitment to their son, however misplaced), whereas those in *Independence Day* are the wife's. *The Burning Bed* offers us few insights into why the woman permits herself to be victimized (beyond a somewhat vague appeal to 'circumstances'), whereas *Independence Day* explains this very thoroughly: Nancy has been raised to be victimized. Her father's complicity with her husband is established in the sequence where both are introduced, the painful dinner scene. First, there is the father's disgust at his son Jack's failure to complete his degree in engineering ("You're a loser"), juxtaposed with his approval of his son-in-law's conspicuous success as a business-man (Les/Cliff De Young is not only attending a convention with all expenses paid, he will even be met by a Cadillac). This is followed by Les' reiterated charge that Nancy treats their youngest son "like a goddamn baby" (she is carrying him on her arm). The father promptly takes the child and tosses him higher and higher in the air until he screams ("It'll toughen him up"). The scene is echoed by the later 'game' Les plays with Nancy (accompanied by the accusation that she is planning to 'play around' while he is away at the convention): repeatedly throwing lighted matches at her. The parallel is underlined by the men's assertion, about both 'games,' in the teeth of all the evidence, that 'S/he enjoys it.'

The climax of the Nancy story takes up Les' 'game' with devastating irony. Nancy tries to commit suicide (the family conspire to regard it as an 'accident') by sitting in the car in the garage with the engine on. Subsequently, after her return from hospital, when Jack finds her covered with bruises he beats Les up in the bar where he cheats on Nancy with another woman. Les forces Nancy to phone Jack and invite him to visit her at six o'clock: she is to take the children to her parents and keep out of the way while he exacts his revenge. Nancy returns early, blocks up the doors and windows, turns on the gas, and awaits her husband. When Les enters the kitchen, she smiles the only unforced smile she has ever given him, and strikes a match. The combination of gas and fire pointedly links his 'game' and her earlier suicide attempt.

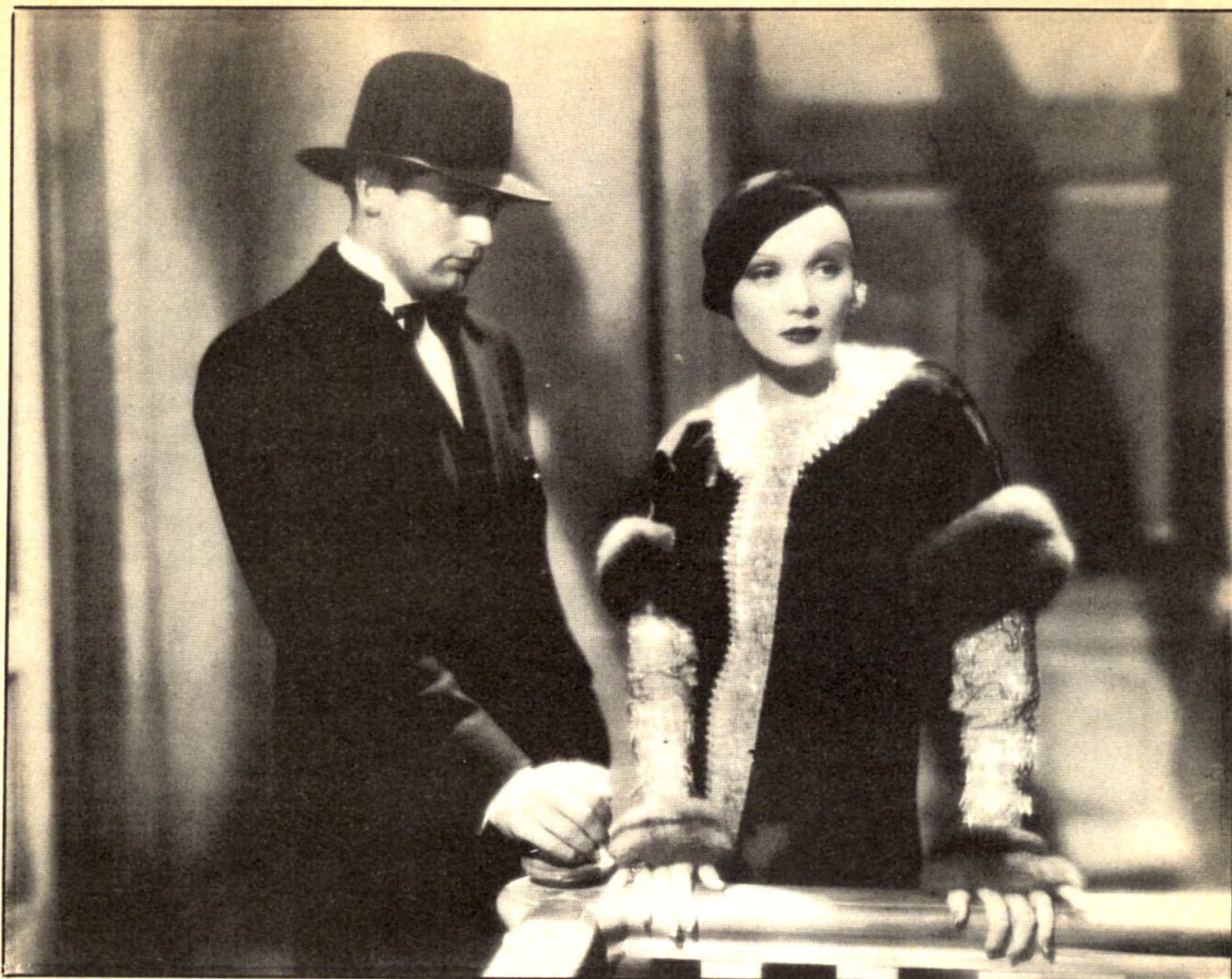
2. Against the passionate negativity of Nancy's action, two aspects of the Mary Ann story give it its strong positive connotations: the tentative development of a non-oppressive, non-patriarchal heterosexual relationship, and the theme of mother/daughter solidarity and mutual commitment (see the detailed treatment of mother/daughter interdependency in the article on *Love Letters* by Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe in this issue). Mary Ann's rejection of marriage gains its force from the juxtaposition of her relationship with Jack Parker with two variously 'traditional' marriages: Nancy's, and that of Mary Ann's own parents. The parents' relationship, based on love, gentleness and mutual caring, stands in obvious respects in sharp con-

trast to the horrors of the Nancy/Les marriage, yet the film is absolutely clear about its oppressiveness. 'Love, gentleness and mutual caring,' in fact, become factors in the woman's oppression, and Nancy's potential insanity is echoed in Carla Taylor's cancer. The suggestion is that, unlike Nancy, Mrs. Taylor (Frances Sternhagen) has nothing tangible to rebel against, so that her sense of oppression has been internalized in the form of a malignant tumor. It is Carla who makes Mary Ann's escape to Los Angeles financially possible: she gives her the 'escape money' which she saved for her own hypothetical defection ("I thought about it—especially in the beginning when we first got married"). One of the film's most complexly poignant moments is the father's farewell to Mary Ann, when he reveals that he always knew about the 'escape money': Carla "could have left any time. But she fell in love with me." The love which he values so highly, and of which he feels so self-deprecatingly proud to be the recipient, is also, the film implies, the source of his wife's cancer.

Hence the importance in the film of the education of Jack Parker. The point the film makes is that he is educable precisely because he is a failure within the patriarchal system and rejected as such by his own father (with Les held up for admiration as patriarchy's characteristic 'success'). His obsession with racing represents at once his rebellion against the kind of success, based entirely on money, that Les so smugly embodies, and the vestiges of his own concern to maintain a self-image of 'masculinity,' a concern he gradually learns to subordinate to the possibility of a relationship of equality with Mary Ann. After the sequence of the nocturnal race he admits to Mary Ann that "I was trying to impress you"; the film makes it clear that it is Jack who is increasingly impressed by Mary Ann, and that he comes to understand that he doesn't have to impress her by being anything other than himself. An aspect of this is his recognition of her difference from the 'typical' small-town girls who are totally complicit in their own subordination: we see him register, with uneasy admiration, her irony when, at the race, she finds herself sent to stand with the other female spectators ("Oh, over there. Lovely. Say, what are they talking about over there? Oh, they're comparing hairstyles."). One of the beauties of the film is its clear awareness that for Parker the experience of relinquishing his 'masculine' position is not castrating but liberating. At the end of the film he is able to recognize that winning the Bearsville trophy one more time really means nothing to him, and can join Mary Ann in Los Angeles. The ending closely parallels that of *The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia* (which might also have been aptly titled *Independence Day*), though we are clearly not meant to see Jack's action as being as definitive as Mark Hamill's stripping off of his cop's uniform: when he goes to Los Angeles Jack takes his trophy and Camaro with him. The film cannot tell us just what form the Jack/Mary Ann relationship will now take, but it has at least managed to set up certain preconditions: the rejection of traditional marriage, the undermining of patriarchal roles, the mutual acceptance of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' as qualities proper to both sexes.

3. The fine achievement the film represents lies, however, less in its individual stories than in the complex and subtle way they interact, at once complementing and commenting on each other. Although the film is primarily concerned with women, Jack is its structural pivot: as Nancy's brother and Mary Ann's lover it is he who draws together the two plots, and the evolution of his consciousness (his 'education') is clearly affected as much by his experience of Nancy and Les





Marlene Dietrich with Cary Grant in *Blonde Venus*: "We are constantly denied access to what she is thinking and feeling."

as by his relationship with Mary Ann. An ironic corollary of this is that it is Jack who, by beating up Les in the bar, inadvertently precipitates the catastrophe. The incident is typical of the film's refusal to make (or allow the audience to make) simple judgements. Certainly, we share Jack's moral outrage, and emotionally we cannot but endorse the violent retribution he exacts. Yet in retrospect we are forced to retract that endorsement: far from remedying an intolerable situation, Jack's actions push it into irremediable disaster. **The film manages a particular subtlety here: it enables us to perceive Les as psychotic while making it clear that the other characters cannot share such a perception.** In the society within which Les exists (and which has the tendency to nurture just such psychosis), a society in which it is *taken for granted* that all human relations are characterized by domination and oppression, his behavior, though a bit excessive, is not perceived (except by drop-outs like Jack) as particularly abnormal. **The film makes the viewer aware of the futility of trying to cure a psychotic by beating him up, whilst honoring the impulse.**

Jack's crucial function as pivot, however, is that of bringing the two women together, and the crucial scene is that in which they drink 'grasshoppers' together, brutally interrupted by Les. Their brief, inadequate friendship is one of the most touching things in the film. The scene is the one

time when Nancy is alone with another woman. Earlier, immediately before her suicide attempt, her mother, sensing something amiss, tries to make contact with her, offering a 'talk.' But we know and Nancy knows that **the only project her mother's 'talk' can conceivably encompass is that of re-enclosing her in a position of conjugal submission and resignation;** the obvious cross-reference here is Mary Ann's relationship with *her* mother, the source of her rebellious 'spirit' (the quality Carla Taylor especially admires, and which is totally repressed in Nancy until it erupts in fire). Like all other Hollywood feminist movies, *Independence Day* nowhere acknowledges the existence of a women's movement or the possibility of political organization. Yet the 'grasshopper' scene strongly implies the need for them: it is quite clear in its suggestion that the only hope for Nancy would be solidarity with other women. This is also, of course, what Les cannot tolerate: underlying his specific objections that Nancy is drinking at four o'clock in the afternoon and that his dinner isn't ready is his terror of what his wife's friendship with another woman (and a 'liberated' one at that) might imply: what they might say about him, the positions they might adopt (Nancy is not supposed to *have* positions). That the fear is fully justified is immediately confirmed: it is the only moment in the film where Nancy (however incoherently and ineffectually) asserts herself and



her own pleasure as possible values. Later, as a necessary feature of her 'solution,' she calmly orders vodka and *crème de menthe* through a delivery service, turns on the gas, and mixes herself a grasshopper as she awaits her husband, smiling with quiet, solitary pleasure at the personal 'independence day' she is so terribly celebrating, and to which her brief intimacy with another woman has so significantly contributed.

But the two plots relate to each other in more ways than are accounted for in those moments when their actions coalesce. Each works as a means of 'placing' the other. If the film were solely about Nancy, it would scarcely transcend the limits of the classical woman's melodrama which, if it can be appropriated for radical feminism, also typically offers itself for appropriation by female masochism. It is the co-existence of the Mary Ann story that opens up a sense of possible choices beyond masochism and despair. On the other hand, the Nancy story consistently exposes the limitations and inadequacies of Mary Ann's position. It is one of the film's strengths that, while it evokes great sympathy for both women (and for Jack Parker), it offers no easy or unqualified identification figure; it also makes nonsense of the assumption (unfortunately widespread in contemporary critical theory, and admittedly encouraged by the majority of modern Hollywood films) that 'Realism' automatically implies a closed spectator-position. That Mary Ann's feminism has a precarious, willed quality is a given of the film: from the outset, we see her masking her insecurity behind a studied effrontery and pretension: the flamboyant cigarette-holder, the beret, the misguided forays into French ("Entrée-nous"). The film is also clear about the nature of her ambitions: she wants to achieve success within the male world, to be recognized by men as their equal or superior, but on patriarchal terms. The scene where we are first introduced to her mother points the issue brilliantly: Mary Ann, in her waitress uniform, finds Mrs. Taylor asleep on the bed; the television is on (its back to the camera), and a male voice is enthusing that "Today we are saluting a beautiful young woman who has delivered nine hit singles, nine platinum albums . . ." Mary Ann wearily switches off the set, but the film elsewhere makes it clear that her aspirations scarcely transcend or challenge the kind of patriarchal appropriation of 'exceptional' women that the TV program embodies. (One of the points of the sub-plot is that Nancy is not 'exceptional' in that sense, her true exceptionality being beyond appropriation.) Later, when her photographer-teacher-hero Red Malone/Bert Remsen drops in with the news of her scholarship, the essential comment is made on Mary Ann's own aspirations as photographer: Malone tells her that her work is better than his was at her age, and we understand that the difference is only of aesthetic quality. Mary Ann brings no feminist perspective to her work—she is simply out to do what men do, only better.

The inadequacy is implied above all in the repeated juxtapositions of the two stories. This is most obvious in the jarring effect of Mary Ann's initial references to Nancy (whom she has not yet met, but whose predicament has already been made agonizingly present to the audience): perhaps she's 'crazy', perhaps she'll serve a live chicken for dinner.<sup>4</sup> More important, though, is the film's recognition that the brand of feminism embodied in Mary Ann is quite unable to help—is in fact irrelevant to—the Nancies of our culture: the woman proves herself the equal of men, but patriarchy continues. This brings us back, finally, to the film's fire and water imagery. Its use appears at first glance paradoxical: Mary Ann is the assertive, energetic, liberated

woman, Nancy the submissive one, yet it is the former who is associated with water, the latter with fire. The water imagery is used, in fact, to imply the superficiality, the illusoriness, of Mary Ann's aspirations: she dreams (and her mother endorses the dream) of living in a Los Angeles apartment with a swimming-pool outside the window. Mandel ends the scene where mother and daughter, sitting out on the porch at night, close their eyes and 'imagine', with a long slow track out that places the characters in extreme long-shot, distancing us from their dream, and repeats the technique exactly for the scene where Mary Ann and Jack, on a country outing, frolic boisterously in a lake. At the end of the film Mary Ann has her apartment, but it is small and unglamorous, and the final pan from the reunited lovers to the window reveals that the swimming-pool is choked with dead leaves. It is the film's way of refusing us the guarantee of a happy ending and of commenting finally on the nature of Mary Ann's feminism. The 'trendy liberal feminism' that on first viewing I mistakenly thought was being offered 'straight' is in fact very carefully and complexly placed. The ending confirms the sense of the complex nature of the relationship between the two stories: if Mary Ann's story is there to suggest that there *are* alternatives for women besides despair and suicide, the Nancy story is there to point the inadequacy of a merely personal solution like Mary Ann's. Patriarchy will not just go away: it has to be blown up: the thesis also of Lizzie Borden's admirable, and aptly titled, *Born in Flames*.

*Numerous ideas in this article, especially those concerning the association of women with fire, derive from conversations with Andrew Britton.*

## FOOTNOTES

1. I use the term 'human' here not in any idealist, hence patriarchal, sense, but to indicate the ability to enter into meaningful and mutual relations with other humans, as opposed to becoming a fetishized icon. (See *Marx and Human Nature*, by Norman Geras.)
2. *Katharine Hepburn: the Thirties and After*; *Cary Grant: Comedy and Male Desire*. Both are published by Tyneside Cinema.
3. It is symptomatic of the sickness of the contemporary Hollywood cinema that, since *Independence Day*, it has found no significant roles for Dianne Wiest to play, restricting her to trivial parts in largely inane movies: John Lithgow's wife in *Footloose*, Meryl Streep's friend in *Falling in Love*.
4. Kathleen Quinlan seems to be to constitute the film's one serious problem: her performance is excellent but she looks several years too old for a role that might have been written for Kristy McNichol. As a result, remarks like those quoted sound rather more callous and insensitive than perhaps they should.

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# **Fathers, Feminism and Domination:** Marxist theory on ideology in popular film



Jane Fonda in *Rollover*.



by Scott Forsyth

**M**ARXISTS ASK SOME OBVIOUS questions in considering the characteristics of contemporary popular films: how do they relate to social reality, to dominant ideology and the political conjuncture? But also some "aesthetic" questions: what are the formal and generic trends?; what are the pleasures?; what is the social process involved?

Regardless of theory, thinking of Hollywood makes us think of commercial success. Immediately our consideration must feel it is trailing behind armies of market researchers, demographers, psychographers, advertising and promotion agencies, reviewers—nobody studies the tendencies of the film industry more than the industry itself. No one searches more assiduously for the alchemic formula for success, the delicate play between hit and flop. From "scientific research" to "show-biz hunch," this self-examination is crucial to production and distribution—a rhetorical comprehension of a major capitalist industry. It provides several familiar "stories" of film art and business: the wily producer with a nose for a hit—from the moguls to Thalberg to Spielberg (or their fictional stand-ins in innumerable show-biz films); or the flipside—the evil genius manipulating the masses and torturing "artists" (as in many films, memoirs, etc.). Success is often a way to dismiss film from serious consideration: the industry and its critics often use the same phrases—"it's just entertainment." Nonetheless, it seems to me that radicals, like the capitalists, must begin in the marketplace of popularity, deafened by popcorn and cash-registers: success, haunted by failure.

### Ideology and Political Criticism

I'm trailing behind Robin Wood's delineation of Dominant Tendencies in *CineAction!* No. 1, which also begins in the market, with the criterion of popularity. Readers will recognize Wood's familiar deft characterization of films, his compelling radical anger, and his convincing connection of diverse movies. Specifically, Wood argues that contemporary Hollywood (approx. since the later '70s) systematically reflects the ideology of a consolidation of the "Law of the Father," after the rebellions of the '60s and '70s, the post-Vietnam era; that the ideological texts restore the F/father, subordinate the

wife/mother, infantilize the male spectator, and prepare for a nuclear apocalypse that is the logic of masculinity. As an account of an ideological theme across films and genres, this is an interesting case; as the characterization of Hollywood it is more ambitious and as a result raises several dilemmas about the premises of political criticism—especially, from a Marxist perspective, on the limitations of 'psychoanalytic feminism' and the relation of ideology to aesthetics. I want to raise detailed objections to Wood's Hollywood, to raise these issues in a complementary way. (Naturally, as soon as one critic makes a movie list, someone else will draw up another—that's more or less what I'm going to do.)

Impressionistically, Wood's readers probably have several reactions: some fear and trepidation over the dangerous times; some feeling of self-congratulation over similar responses to films on the "hit list"; some superiority (a little pity or contempt) for the deluded millions who make the hits hits; a little guilt over pleasurable responses—tears, laughter, fear—to those same films. Wood manages to be both entertainingly audacious and surprisingly cautious. The picture is absolute—"extremely reactionary, most impoverished, most cynical period..." But the films attacked are a collection of fantasy blockbusters, teen exploitation films and sentimental melodramas which are almost all dismissed or condescended to by producers, critics, even audiences; targets whose defense is *only* popularity.

These impressions should help situate Wood's article within several venerable lineages of radical criticism. For at least a century, radical and traditional aesthetics have worried about art which is within the market, within industrialized production, for mass consumption—Hollywood is still the emblem for just such art. The "masses," the "people," the "lower classes" refuse the acquisition of sophisticated culture or submit passively to the bread and circuses of the moguls, avoiding the ascribed tasks of "culture" or "politics" in favor of consumable, degraded pleasure. Other movements of art are evoked by way of derogatory comparison: for conservatives and many Marxists, the high art of bourgeois culture; for patrons of the avant-garde, the movements of the '20s or the varied modernisms post-WW II; for Wood, classic Hollywood and a few "auteur" survivors. Motivated by urgent political anger, Wood is so appalled at the masses' "taste," he

ignores or suspends questions of pleasure entirely. Implicitly, we must follow the familiar route and equate the reactionary with the popular, and any attendant pleasures with "reassurance" or "mindless fun." However much it is a lament, Wood's stance—"passive surrender or total rejection"—is a classic version of an ascetic position and, in its distance from the mass art, it is as classically elitist. At issue is the justification.

In ideological criticism the justification is, of course, ideological. An impressive array of films is excavated to demonstrate the symptoms of an ideological construction. The underlying premise of this method is, perhaps, that ideology produces art, but the explicit assumption is that analysis of the ideological text results in a political rank which radicals will take as evaluative criteria. Wood consistently underlines the extreme, even unique, nature of the Hollywood moment: Hollywood's extremism validates an extreme response. Ironically, one of the major explorers of Hollywood's pleasures abandons that pursuit in the face of the dominant tendencies that he sees. This is familiar territory: the thesis of a near monolithic ideology promulgated by an equally monolithic mass media apparatus; dominant ideology asserts itself ruthlessly at all levels of social practice including the cultural; total manipulation, mass passivity. Frightening as this seems, there is also something "reassuring" about such criticism. Quibbles about the "relative autonomy" of art are bypassed; as noted, confusing questions of form, pleasure and response are defined as singularly ideological, and any reflection between the social order and art can be read as comparison of different orders of the ideological text. The face of the enemy is grimly clear—a delightful moment in any horror story.

There are some classic counter-assertions to these premises; that art does not strictly 'reflect' the social (or psychic) order; that ideology does not produce art, but that the ideological text is one level of a complex interaction in any art (including media) amongst production, form, reception, social moment—a process not simply homogeneous and monolithic; that the issues of form and pleasure can't be read as "simply" ideological even if ideologically inflected or implicated; that the political ranking of art may be a drastic simplification of politics, if not an erroneously truncated evaluation of art; that political criticism must mesh, in some way, with aesthetic criticism.



These premises seem to me to be useful and more open to interpretive evidence, but it may be that the social position and formal development of the mass media and cultural industries make both the defense of autonomy and Wood's ideological critique outmoded in important ways.

In contrast to much ideological criticism, Wood is refreshingly explicit about his version of monolithic ideology. It is simply reactionary, the Law of the Father. "The authority, not only of the symbolic fathers (government, President, police, organized religion) but of the literal father within the patriarchal nuclear family, and of the internalized 'father'—the Superego." Patriarchy simply *equals* society: we can connect the ideological project and 'story' from psyche to family to society to art—trace the grim visages of punishing fathers till they gaze down at us from the movie screens. The implication is that dominant ideology equates with the specific conjuncture in the right-wing movements of Reaganism and the Moral Majority and their repressive anti-feminist, anti-gay, pro-family programme.

### All That Liberalism Allows

It may be just beyond my imagination or focus to see the contemporary screen dominated by such a singular image or ideological construction, but in the first place this seems to demand a drastically narrow theory of dominant ideology, and thus a narrow vision of social reality. If we look at bourgeois ideology in the social formations of advanced capitalism over much of the century, we cannot consider it simply reactionary or even dominated by the exclusive concern with familial and sexual ideology implied by Wood's definition and demonstration. We would see a complex inter-connection of themes usually considered under the term "liberalism," with various adjectives from "corporate" to "welfare," and addressing varying levels of social reality—the market, the family, the nation-state, gender—but, overarching all, Progress, capitalism's perennial Utopian rhetoric of its own transformative power, writ at the level of the subject as an agitated individualism.

What is worth emphasizing against a notion of monolithic ideology is the fact that bourgeois ideology has not been homogeneous or univocal: it contains contradiction and contestation. In fact, the most prevalent definition of ideol-

ogy as the imaginary resolution of real contradictions implies fissure and shortfall inscribed within any ideology. Older themes are subsumed; anachronisms may flourish; different ruling factions fight it out; oppositional ideologies develop under bourgeois hegemony. (The English Queen and the Pope are only the most obvious feudal remnants to continue to be ideologically and institutionally effective: "free enterprise" remains a potent phrase despite referring to a reality vanished a century ago; the movements of the '60s and '70s illustrate potential for integration or recuperation.) **At best, bourgeois ideologies come to a kind of contradictory unity.**

This unity lauds capitalism as the bearer of "modernity" in some "neutral" way. Marx, by contrast, saw this as a remorseless dialectic of construction and destruction engulfing individuals, classes, technology, nature, the capitalists themselves, but always running into the class relations of production—always organizing its potential destruction. History is not written ideology: it is, finally, class struggle. This is not a self-perception of bourgeois ideology; but it must encompass a comprehension of the "permanence" of class authority and the constant social challenge and chaos it engenders. In a simple example, this involves the translation of the "freedom" of the market to the level of ideological structure. In the bourgeois democracies, we don't receive ideology as solely an authoritative announcement; we receive a "choice" of ideas, a "debate," where competing positions have the status of consumer goods. (That is, the "aestheticization of politics" has proceeded with the methodology of consumerism—gradually replacing the grander transformative vision of Progress with the infinitely multiplying and disappearing chain of commodity images.) Authority is as much in circumscription as pronouncement since the pluralist market's array of identical choice is essentially binary—in politics liberal or conservative, in morals traditional Victorian or modern . . . Pepsi or Coke, Reagan or Mondale, Archie or Maude . . . (in Canada we have Ed Broadbent in the third party position of 7-Up).

This isn't an adequate description of ideological elaboration, but it should indicate the circumscribed oppositions that structure it and that, in a way, constitute the substance of freedom or democracy. In fact, contemporary politics and subjectivity may involve

convoluted combinations: for instance, our "personalities" must follow the injunctions of "production" (discipline, work ethic, Protestant denial, individualism) *and* those of "consumption" (immediate gratification, play, group hedonism)—thus apparent divisiveness is structured by the corporate organization of both labor and leisure; or, for instance, in politics, Gary Hart's famous Yuppie campaign with its socially "progressive" *and* anti-working class platform.

This ideological flexibility is related to institutional flexibility, not only in the transformation to monopoly capitalism and the rise in state economic intervention, but in familial and sexual reality as well—a flexibility which the all-encompassing concept of Patriarchy makes difficult to see. Clearly, this flexibility is the crisis of the family, a vast array of social changes embracing the first and second waves of feminism, over the past 150 years. But it is a favorite crisis of capitalism (which Reich observed needs and undermines the family simultaneously) and an essentially institutionalized one. This crisis spans the integration of the family into the dialectic of mass production and mass consumption characteristic of modern capitalism. Alienated production finds solace only in alienated reproduction; the "cash nexus" of commodification socializes family "autonomy." Ideologically, this is accompanied by the centrality of ideologies of consumption and distribution which attempt to efface production and labor. Structurally, this is the move from a cohesive social unit to a consumption unit. The intolerable strains of the integration of individuals and families into mass production and consumption meant the liberal welfare state emerged simultaneously with the consumer society: first, to rationalize distribution; second, to merge working class demands and middle class reform into an array of "services" which consolidate social control; sometimes lessening the "burden" of double oppression for women (eg. homes for the aged or handicapped); sometimes providing the only available channel for social progress. This is, of course, also the favored crisis of bourgeois drama in film, theatre and television for much of the century; it has the humdrum familiarity of the daily press—divorce, fragmentation, serial monogamy, the "sexual revolution"—abhorred by conservatives, celebrated by liberals, and happily organized into the variegated demographic units of advertising. This



crisis is contradictory: it allows moments of "freedom" in relation to the oppression of the family but it is also part of increasingly brutal social relations; the perpetuity of the crisis holds little sense of transition to something "better"—only a "liberalized" patriarchy.

There is some sense of this familiar social reality in Wood's ideological drama of repression, but his version of the psychoanalytic gives it a particular absolute character. The process of psychic formation is, apparently, *directly* political, installing the correct personality and gender construct, buttressed by "socializing." (At another point, he equates this with "corruption," outside psychoanalysis in the "voluntary" realm of moralism.) He is, it seems, restating the attempt by Reich and some of the theorists of the Frankfurt School to connect the psychic, the social, and the political in an effort to explain the rise of fascism and the decline of revolutionary politics. It is the authoritarian personality which guarantees Authority—sexually repressed, fearful and loving of patriarchal power. Certainly we can see the agenda of the Moral Majority here, or at least be reminded of the frenzied petty-bourgeois masses of European fascism; even the possibility of fascism in Reaganism's encouragement of Nazi and KKK violence, in the hysterical re-arming of imperialism, or in the dangerously avuncular twinkle in Reagan's eye. However, the right is not homogeneously victorious even in an increasingly brutal and authoritarian America. Ideological contradiction continues: if the left is in retreat, bourgeois liberalism retains some vitality, if not hegemony. In fact, the Reaganite coalition itself is notoriously divided on its "social agenda" and on such dogma as supply-side economics which threatens the financial bourgeoisie so hated by the New Right.

It is also difficult to maintain such an equation of politics, patriarchy and psyche (and its attendant progression from little to big "fathers") at the level of social theory. For instance, Marcuse specifically rejects this equation and the thesis of the authoritarian personality, and sees capitalism as increasingly rationalized, administering de-individualized individuals, homogenized by the degraded "culture" industries. The strictures of traditional Patriarchy are so in disjunction with the literal family and the required psychology of contemporary capitalism that he posits a "society without fathers": the

basis for the notion of "repressive tolerance"—the provision of partial "liberation" on the basis of consumer affluence. Importantly, both the authoritarian personality and administered capitalism theses shift the focus from the terrain of the potential for contestative and collective struggle in class relations, to dominated individuals. In Foucault, authority is similarly difficult to locate in the Patriarch: we follow, instead, a discourse of power through institutions and the dominating discourse of sexuality specifically includes a liberal critique of "repression" (from Romanticism to psychoanalysis to psychotherapy to consumerism). Althusser, whose expansion of the terrain and effectivity of ideology is pivotal to radical aesthetics, similarly presents a dominated individual faced with imposing ideological state apparatuses which relegate the family to a decidedly secondary plane. The family drama of Patriarchy seems only partially adequate to describe the particular oppressive and patriarchal family of current capitalism. It seems to stand more coherently as the symmetrical opposition to Reagan's glorification of the repressive family—respectively malevolent or benevolent fathers, entwined, as Good and Bad Fathers always are.

### What Happened to the Sixties?

If Wood's Patriarchy seems at first ahistorical, it (and thus, his Hollywood), is wrenched with almost compensatory violence into alignment with political movements: the liberating rebellions of the '60s and '70s answered by the repression of the '80s; to me, a dramatic overestimation of collapse and an equally dramatic re-installation of authority. It is possible to appreciate the importance of the eruptions of the '60s—their challenge, their politicization of a generation of radicals—and perceive how much they remained within bourgeois liberalism. The anti-war movement dissipated overnight, its broad but shallow pacifism largely failing to deepen into anti-imperialist politics. The fate of "black liberation" is just as salutary. By the early '70s it was derailed or defeated by a combination of violent repression against militants, the dominance of a legalistic civil rights strategy, the promotion of a small black middle class based on poverty programmes, token integration and Democratic electioneering. Blacks in America are materially worse-off

now while black Democrats preside over the deteriorating ghettos like a procession of Bantustan chiefs. The movements of the '70s (I would add environmentalism and anti-nuke to women and gays) seem to be a long way from "potent, permanent and challenging." As movements, they have more often been sporadic, disorganized and marginal; surely that is one of the features of the right turn. Their continued existence into the '80s is some grounds for optimism—they have popularized critical ideas, made modest gains and raised difficult issues of how sexual, racial and class oppression interpenetrate. However, if the movements have broadened the radical agenda in the last decade, it is a sign of the right turn that radicals have been unable to present a comprehensive radical alternative, and have largely acquiesced to the sectoral and reformist "consensus" of the movements. Part of the reason for this failure lies with dilemmas in socialist strategy, part of it rests with the fact that the "movements" have been partially integrated into programmes and policies of the liberal state—always pleased to broaden its interventionist and regulatory power, happy to police attitudes and images.

Of course, modest gains are subject to threats from the right, but many of the gains are brutally superficial. For instance, racism may be less significant as an ideology in most capitalist countries with their human rights commissions, charters of Rights, etc., but racism has perhaps *never* been more crucial to the national and international organization of labor. The tenuous tolerance for gay "liberation" in urban enclaves is matched by vicious police harassment. Feminists in many countries have constitutional and legislative programmes of equal rights, affirmative action, etc., while the main difference in the position of women resides in their entry into wage-labor—a reorganization of the labor force towards the service sector—both lessening the isolation of women in the family and fixing their oppression more obviously to capital.

Nonetheless, Wood's hope for transforming society rests with these movements. He is in a long line of New Leftists wrestling with the dilemma of a transformative agency in modern capitalism. Disillusioned with the apparent "integration" of the working class which did not seem to be fulfilling its historic Marxist tasks (Marcuse is the major theorist here), radicals disco-





E.T.: alien as patriarch?

vered various new "vanguards"—blacks youth, students, women, gays, native people, lumpen, third world nationalists. **Rebellion against authority is emphasized rather than class structure.** However, even if these groups may be crucial to revivifying radicalism, none occupies anything like the strategic location within production which prompted the Marxist proposition, and none (with the partial exception of third world nationalists who have also been Communists) has ever mounted a comparable challenge to even relatively routine class struggle. **This seems to point to the final dilemma for analysts of Patriarchy: the model tends to efface class, or makes it appear as an addendum.** In fact, only as specific oppression is understood as operating through class structure, and political differentiation and class consciousness develops within the "movements," can there be some hope for a comprehensive radicalism.

It may be time to reckon the hope for these movements, the turn from the

working class, as misplaced when we consider the key features of the right turn. Is it comprehensible as the reassertion of Patriarchy? Is it directed exclusively against the movements? Not at all. The last 10 years have seen, amidst spiralling recessions, a turbulent restatement of very old-fashioned class struggle—from the local to national levels and largely to the advantage of the ruling class. Second, it is marked by a resurgence of similarly old-fashioned anti-communism (specifically in the service of armed imperial intervention and ultimately world war). On these issues, there is essentially unity amongst liberals, conservatives and, where they are in power, socialists. (Mitterand would be the extreme case of a "reactionary progressive"; Canada's NDP or Parti Quebecois provide local variations.) Since class struggle is absent from the schema of Patriarchy, we are left to perceive this politics as an instance of fatherly authority which seems, at best, inadequate: **what is gained in analyzing patriarchal structure to explain the complex over-**

**determination of oppression is lost by reductionist singularity.**

### Oedipal Realism

The final equation in Wood's dominant tendency is between Oedipal resolution and "Realist" narrative. Thus, where this line of criticism (in which Wood does not usually position himself) equates ideological and plot resolution, we find in these films restoration of the Father, ensurance of Patriarchy. **That is, narrative itself is also authoritarian.** The conflation of a political and an aesthetic category does provide a little titillation for us radicals but, **in critical practice, it tends to assume the pleasures of narrative are automatically reactionary,** poses a singular reading of a film, and thus a singularly fixed notion of spectatorship, **ignoring the tactics of appropriation and play an audience may bring to a film—i.e.** that there is interaction between populace and popular culture. The Realist paradigm has provided instructive examination of the "economy" of Hollywood's



continuity style, but the diversity of particular films or genres—their play of innovation and repetition—is less well presented. Sometimes the paradigm seems to apply “realist” criticism to genres with little connection to realism. Similarly, the attention to “resolution” may miss the locus of cinematic pleasure: even the simplest narrative structure poses a disrupted stasis encompassing the body of the film, the plot, and its pleasures of suspense, anxiety, anguish, etc., which may be more important than the pleasure of closure. The ideological text may propose resolution of contradiction while the narrative is *naturalizing* contradiction—contiguous but not equivalent processes. (Of course, much radical criticism has discovered or reconstructed subversion, disruption, incoherence—the quasi-political opposition to narrative authority—against resolution: while interesting, this process does seem very similar to traditional academic responses to genre-based art—the search for the “exceptional,” the discovery of “ambiguity.”)

Finally, the emphasis on Oedipal resolution tends to underplay other psychoanalytic “moments” with enormous resonance in film. For instance, the pre-Oedipal splitting of Good/Bad parents, which may be defined by the Oedipal, but is momentarily out of control—it’s hard to imagine the modern horror film without it. Or the post-Oedipal “family romance” with its neurotic day-dream of new parents, new social circumstances, new lovers—the romantic melodrama. Indeed, Oedipal resolution itself is usually seen as partial, traumatic, and incomplete in its “containment” of filial rebellion—this would be the space of dissonance, neurosis, uncertain fluidity in gender construction. In a sense, this is the psychic correlative to post-war capitalist culture: commodification and containment of harmless rebellions.

I have drawn out the premises of radical criticism because I think the debates are important, and I think they determine the ‘reflection’ we see in looking at Hollywood. As an exercise, perhaps we can accept Wood’s flawed premises and see his reactionary tendency as partially representative, follow his ideological ‘logic’ and, still, wonder what’s missing?

### Fonda and Feminism

Certainly, we needn’t look far for reflections of the Right. John Milius (the Conan films, *Red Dawn*) and Syl-

vester Stallone seem to be developing a genre of neo-fascist body-counting. *Rambo* and *Star Wars* are now part of political language. Spielberg, the most successful of recent producers, seems to be consciously revivifying an idealized family by hurling it through the dramas of horror and fantasy, and a quasi-religious evocation of good and evil. His conservative sentimentalism has become the object of self-parody, especially in the promotional “auteur” disrupts with Dante and Hooper on *Poltergeist* and *Gremlins* over degrees of horror and sentiment. Wood’s list of restored fathers is highly relevant, though if one deletes flops like *Middle-Age Crazy* and *Author! Author!* and a prototypically ’80s liberal film like *Kramer vs. Kramer*, it is perhaps not so extraordinary. It also seems to me that the problem of the father is at least as important in these films as the restoration.

However, I have offered a broader view of dominant ideology, its contradictions and its circumscriptions. What of the integration of the movements of the ’70s? What of liberalism, which Wood deletes entirely from his characterization? The most obvious correspondence to the “new patriarchs” is the integration of liberal feminism. Probably no social movement has ever received such attention and, sometimes, sympathy from the media. Radicals must for some years now consider feminism not only as the ideology of a protest movement, but as an integrated theme in dominant ideology—perhaps to the degree that it is extracted from the movement, or to the extent that the movement’s mass character becomes more fragile. Certainly, mainstream feminism has always perceived the solution to the oppression of women to be within the legal and class structures of bourgeois society. Recent symbolic events would be the Ferraro candidacy or, in Canada, the spectacle of all three federal parties vying for honorable feminist status in the last election; or the anti-pornography campaign which has brought feminists into alliance with both their enemies on the right and, more coherently, with the authoritarian liberalism of the state: anti-porn legislation is just part of an intensification of the regulation of everyday life, from smoking to drinking to family violence.

The gains of feminism are more ideological than material: benefits for individual women are class-stratified so the most obvious channel of ideological integration has been into middle class variations on individualism and career-

ism. Media feminism is most visible around several major “stories”: the transformation into a “new” woman, strong, “independent”; a parallel “new” man, sensitive, non-macho; their combination into an egalitarian couple; the validation of a fragmented family or the exposure of the oppressive family. None of these is new and they all overlap or even, since they are largely depoliticized, emerge in ideologically opposed films. They are motifs in ideology and narrative which we read throughout the mass media. The new woman or man is explained in innumerable magazine articles as advice for our own transformations; the strong woman as integrated token is replayed in each sports figure, politician or newsreader—most repeatedly in advertising’s creation of a prototype upper-class career woman. The conventional line of Hollywood feminism begins in the late ’70s and stretches on to today: *Julia*, *An Unmarried Woman*, *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*; on to the unions with *Norma Rae*, the music business with *Coal-Miner’s Daughter*; combined with anti-nuke environmentalism in *The China Syndrome* and *Silkwood*; tragic variations in *The Rose* and *Frances*; comic versions in *9 To 5* and *Private Benjamin*; less successfully co-opted in *Girl Friends* and *Heart Like A Wheel*; and down to the farm in last year’s *Places in the Heart*, *Country*, and *The River*. Less respectably, some films simply reverse genders like the cycle of rape-revenge films from *Lipstick* to *Sudden Impact* which more or less repeat *Death Wish*. Or the sole survivor of numerous teen massacres, a lone female who must rise to the violent occasion, detached from collective resolution or salvation by authority; Signourney Weaver in *Alien* is a big-budget equivalent, and the mother-to-be in *The Terminator* an interesting variation: her heroism is of world-historic importance.

Perhaps the most obvious strong women are throughout television melodrama: the evil and beneficent capitalist matriarchs of *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Falconcrest*, or *A Woman of Substance* also provide a strange replay of classic ’40s melodrama; cop shows from *Police Woman* to *Cagney and Lacey* contemplate females in male roles. More specifically feminist drama covers working class heroines in *A Matter of Sex* or *The Dollmaker*. Horror of the family dramas like *Something About Amelia* and *The Burning Bed* illustrate the continuity between daily press coverage, fictional genres and the liberal state’s agenda—all commodifications



of the crisis of the family.

The most obvious validation (and sometimes, trivialization) of the changing social roles and fragmented families of contemporary North America occur across the repetitive range of TV sitcoms and their career women, single parents, extended families, domineering children, work-place fellowships, roommates, etc. The idealization of the family is specifically separated from its traditional structure and runs through varied reconstitutions and collapses—investing social life as a whole with its search for reassuring organization, simultaneously nostalgic and inventive in a de-politicized fashion (in much the same way as advertising addresses and reconstitutes a divisive social life). Of course, this is evidence from a medium which is different but increasingly overlapping; it is essentially the same Hollywood that produces film and television.

An interesting variation of feminism that has been recently prominent is found in the cross-dressing comedies: *Victor/Victoria*, *Tootsie*, *Yentl*, and, a variant, *All of Me*. These films are all didactically feminist in message (with *Victor/Victoria*'s additional welcoming of gay "liberation" into a liberal embrace): one detects the arrival of Stanley Kramerism to sexual cinema politics with a similar sense of complacent closure. Interestingly, all the films studiously avoid any hint of bisexuality amongst the stars, all construct more sensitive males and more egalitarian couples, and all more or less abuse a secondary female character who is insufficiently liberated. These are all major hits with the exception of *Yentl*, which some critics have argued is the most resolutely feminist. On the other hand, its concluding propulsion of feminist struggle into American utopianism is also most in alignment with the rightward turn.

In any case, the enormous success of the import *La Cage aux Folles* could probably be substituted in the same cycle. (Dramatic treatments of gay issues have been much less successful: mixed and hostile receptions greeted both *Making Love* and *Personal Best*.)

The feminist motifs emerge in films of varying ideological intentions. *Terms of Endearment*'s valorization of its cheerily sacrificing dead mother is matched with the domination of a matriarch much like those of TV melodramas. She even undergoes a typical liberal transformation: sexual awakening. And the film's casual expulsion of "patriarchs" is at least as drastic as

Mary Tyler Moore's fate in *Ordinary People*. *An Officer and a Gentleman* is organized around a virulent nightmare of good and bad fathers, its Oedipal resolution is the construction of a specifically imperialist masculinity. However rabid the intentions, this central thrust is marginally altered by extraneous sub-plots: poor Debra Winger must try to "sensitize" the hero's near-psychotic personality; a female officer is a nod to "egalitarianism." *Kramer vs. Kramer* stands as something of a perfect male liberal version of the modern family melodramas: the father must attain the sensitivity of a mother; feminism in its simplest sense of self-identity against the family role and careerism is recognized as a problem and given some validity; an egalitarian couple is proposed.

Probably Clint Eastwood stands as the key example of a director, until recently dismissed as reactionary, whose films continue to add up to an intriguing confrontation with women and their sexuality, and an amusingly goading sense of the contradictions of liberal and conservative ideologies of urban America. They also stand as the prime example of a gradual legitimization of feminism—through contestation to condescension to qualified individualist acceptance in *Tightrope*.

The new sensitive male has been constructed in various romantic comedies, frequently with Burt Reynolds (eg. *Semi-Tough* and *Starting Over*). More popular and more convoluted in ideological resonance are the male adultery comedies: *10* is the prototype and major hit, and Dudley Moore is the major star. This small cycle seems to be something of a middle-aged response to the teen sex comedy: family stability and masculine sexuality are represented with derision and ridicule but male fantasies of female sexuality are totally indulged. The "sexual revolution" is conservatively rejected as entrancing but "soul-less." A more egalitarian couple is proposed in *10* with a feminist reconsideration of the original partner. (*10*'s vague feminism is, of course, matched by the spectacular promotion of one of the more obsessively commodified female images of the decade—Bo Derek.) A very unsuccessful variation is *The Last Married Couple in America* which specifically blames "women's lib and gay lib" for marital breakdown, but still proposes a memorably idiotic egalitarianism between its star couple. (So far as I know, no one saw this movie but me.)

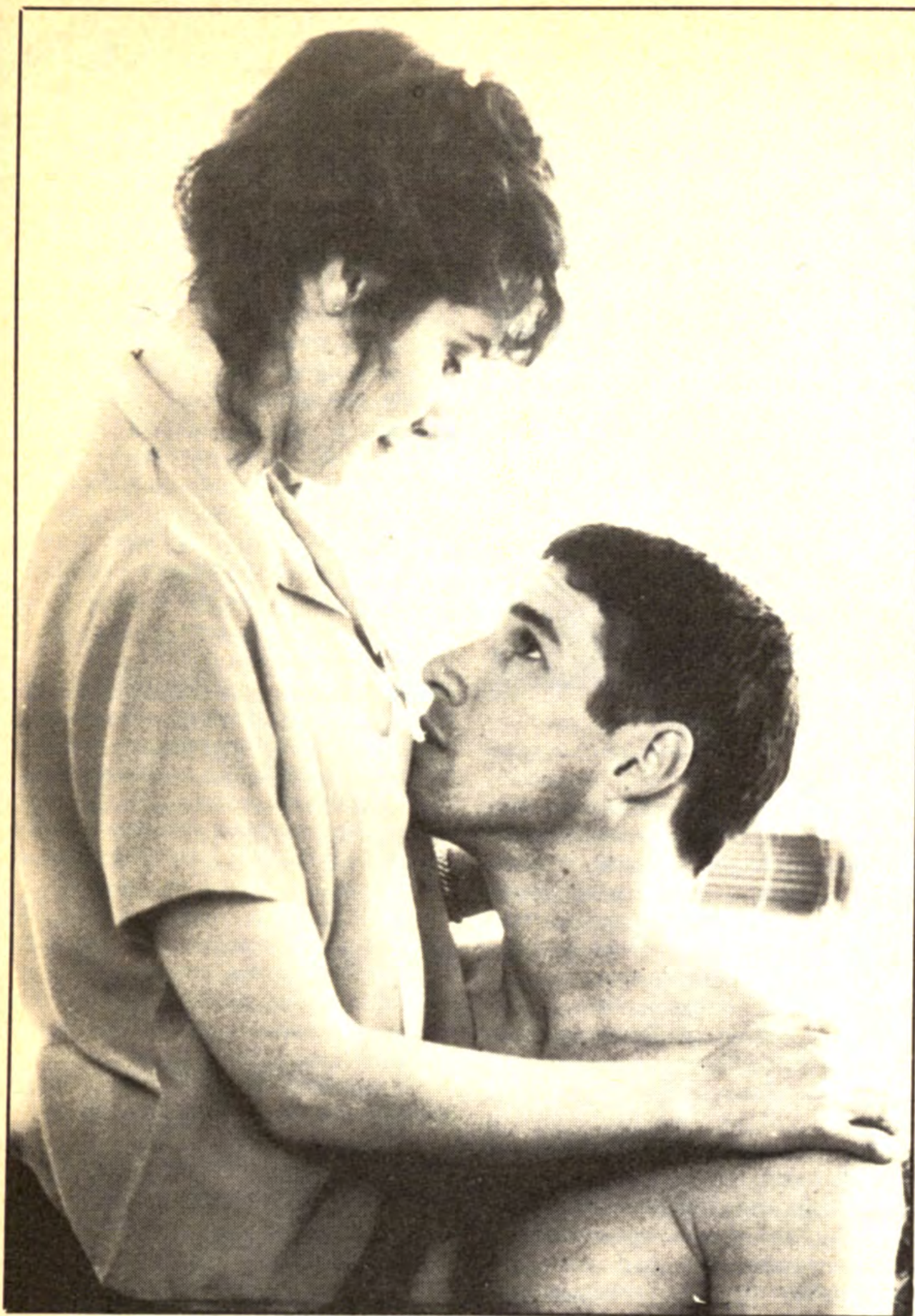
These various responses to feminism

are Hollywood's antidote to a realist critique of its images (as if characters were analogous to social reality and appropriate role models would be "progressive"). Perhaps they do not add up to the equivalent of classic Hollywood female stars which Wood proposes as criteria, but Fonda, Keaton, Streep, Hawn, Field, Burstyn, Dunaway, Cher and others have all done interesting or impressive work across many of the films I've mentioned. The argument of nostalgia is irrefutable, but also futile: classic Hollywood and its institutionalization of stars can't be recreated. In fact, the classic stars have just as frequently been seen as a mystifying or reactionary identification: no one has ever connected the strong female stars to any social movement (which is the crux of Wood's contemporary argument) and the reconstruction of stars as subversive is a notable example of the strength of the filmic moment *against* the Realist narrative Wood proposes in this discussion.

Very few contemporary stars have anything like the resonance of the classics, but surely Debra Winger is a superficial and ephemeral example of '80s Hollywood. Why not one star who has an incomparably more complex star persona across her work, promotion and life and additionally provides a key connection to classic Hollywood—Jane Fonda? She is perfect for the ideological picture I have proposed: she glamorously amalgamates feminism and capitalism; as a "star" in the transformation from "sex kitten" to heroic female (from *Julia* to her fitness books); as businesswoman in film, TV and fitness; politically, in the trajectory from nascent anti-imperialism to bourgeois party politics; familiarly, with her stardom balanced by Tom Hayden's presidential ambitions and "egalitarian" parenting. The '80s reaction to '60s radicalism isn't just an hysterical forgetting: Fonda represents a more sophisticated subsuming and recuperation of radicalism.

Fonda's successful films are clearly in the feminist lineage, though she has also produced *On Golden Pond* which makes Wood's reactionary list. One of her more intriguing films typifies the sense of ideological combination just outlined. In the tradition of those other '80s epics of capitalism's 'interior' (*Dallas*, *Dynasty*), *Rollover* glamorizes while it condemns. In a typical transformation from rich housewife to conscious reformer, Fonda's romance with Kristofferson's reprise of Gary Cooper in *The Fountainhead* swirls us through the





How do you sensitize the brutal masculine psyche? Winger and Gere in *An Officer and a Gentleman*.

mystifying imagery of stock manipulation, takeovers, etc. Unlike the TV dramas, where we must follow capitalism through the endlessly vicious permutations of monstrous families, *Rollover* provides an heroic and, in the end, egalitarian couple, while its representation of capitalism is, correspondingly, more mystifying even as it purports to investigative objectivity. Ultimately, capitalism isn't condemned for its structure or effect, but for its breakdown: in this case attacked with racist fervor for messing with the Arabs (the most acceptable objects of '80s racism) capitalism collapses from the top down—a daringly specific version of the apoca-

lypse so crucial to '80s blockbusters. However, its newsreel images are coded "anarchic," not revolutionary, and a capitalist Adam and Eve arise from the ashes to do it all again. A heady example of the limits of bourgeois self-criticism.

Hollywood feminism is the most cohesive tendency left out of Wood's ideological characterization. The implication is that mainstream feminism is oppositional, worthy of undifferentiated support. I don't agree and I think that Wood's feminism leads him to some confusion in responding to films he sees as "reactionary." For instance, women viewers are given one

exemption from mass passivity since they "generally don't like *E.T.*" owing to its patriarchal character. This seems to propose an extraordinarily simple and fixed notion of both spectator identification and gender construction, and tries to extend it to the level of the collective audience by means of a rather informal sociology. It tells us nothing but that perhaps the oppressed are more sensitive. Similarly, Wood is filled with rage by the confrontation in *Terms of Endearment* between the dying mother and the careerist acquaintances. The rage is explained by seeing the confrontation as paradigmatic of a patriarchal misrepresentation of the oppression and independence of women. This seems to be an overly simple reading: the film itself sees Winger's maternal sacrifices as excessive and needs to kill her off to give them justification. More importantly, the confrontation is also class loaded: the only relatively latent anxiety in a film so conspicuously based on blatant anxieties is that of class (in a deflected way; the family's economic insecurity, MacLaine's worries about her daughter's unwise marriage, the supermarket check-out scene). Part of Winger's validation against the career women is a populist one, though it is hard for feminists to see that feminism is largely translated in class terms, or that entry into wage-labor is not simple "independence." In any case, bourgeois ideology overall is happy to offer feminism as a working woman's ideology and validate motherhood (women are left to bridge the gap): the scene is paradigmatic only of its own confused ideological intentions.

Finally, while interestingly pointing out the cinematic naturalization of apocalypse, Wood proposes that nuclear war is "the ultimate extension of the social construction of masculinity under capitalism." Apparently gender difference can explain everything—we need not address any difficult questions of imperialism or the hostility of social systems. This is, perhaps, unintentionally typical of the mystifications of pacificism, and the glib, "even-handed" anti-communism of the peace movement: "the story under Russian Communism is not, of course, significantly different."

These are all different examples of how feminism can be integrated into relatively harmless critical thought: the sensitivity of the oppressed, independence as careerism, nuclear war as nasty phallic bullying, anti-communism—feminism "suitable for popular consumption," to quote Wood.





The collective of teen goofs: the glimmer of rebellion in *Porky's*.

## Dancing Teenagers and Funny Monsters

Teenage films present a formal strategy of market organization, across diverse genres, of **a constantly replenished demographic group**. The films tend to put forward a teenagehood suspended before adulthood's ossification of class, sexual and familial roles. Clearly this suspension is both illusory and real—in the sense of a limited liberation organized around a specific culture of consumption and "rebellion" across fashion and all the mass media: adolescence. In some ways, bourgeois adolescence is the prototype of Marcuse's "repressive tolerance": the provision of the liberation of consumerism, relaxed sexual mores, contained rebellion, absence of "identifiable" authority (as opposed to institutional closure). But the films do throw an emphasis on the collective equal to the individual, and continually pose the passage to rigidified adulthood as a problem. As Wood notes, teen films are frequently marked by absent parental authority (baby-sitting, camp, college, nights at the mall, etc.) or institutional settings where authority *in loco parentis* is specifically derided. The teen massacres take this to the extreme: established authority of any kind is absent or impotent in the face of the monster/Superego. The collective dwindles down to a sole survivor and any reconstitution of normalcy is extremely fragile: the pleasures of repetitive compulsion

(serial homicide, serials and sequels, constant "return") are preferred to the pleasures of closure. In one sense this is a degeneration and a 'freezing' of the paradigm of the modern horror film based on sexual repression and the monstrous threat to normalcy (which Wood and others have so ably examined). **In another sense, attendance at a teen massacre film foregrounds the audience's elaborate participation in the murder of their inscribed representatives: cheers, warnings, ratings all provide comic foils to obsessive sado-masochism and emphasize the films' essentially parodic self-referentiality.**

Similarly, the collective teen comedies' interest is, not so much in their dismissal of authority or construction of nicer authority figures (*Porky's* anti-redneck, anti-anti-semitism, anti KKK liberalism is most extreme as a sort of apology for its sexual politics), but in the repetitive attraction of variously rebellious "collectives" against various discredited institutions. That scatologically derisive satires of male and female sexuality and roles elicit "moral" and "realist" parental tsk-tsks would seem to be part of the anticipated pleasures, mild rebellions of teen culture.

But teen massacres and sex comedies are only two of the teen sub-genres, and it is the teen musical which strikes me as the most complex and vital of all of them. *Saturday Night Fever*, *Grease*, *Fame*, *Flashdance*, *Purple Rain*, *Footloose* and others are a line of major hits stretching back to the late '70s. They

embody many of the liberal feminist motifs, and sometimes a limited class consciousness. *Saturday Night Fever* may be the prototype here: Travolta's trajectory is across the river, up-class toward sensitive maleness with his feminist friend, away from the Bad Father—not only working class, but brutal and chauvinist. It surfaces in various teen films: eg. *Purple Rain*, *An Officer and a Gentleman*. (*Purple Rain* is especially combinatorial: Prince moves to sensitivity toward his girlfriend and female colleagues, rejects his brutal father, and has the apparently dead father and family restored in the denouement.) Various compromised strong women and egalitarian couples are created (eg. *Grease*, *Fame*, *Flashdance*). *Footloose* even poses a dancing rebellion against the Moral Majority.

Ideologically, the teen musicals tend to be **classically liberal** in the American sense: **posing a deflection of the dilemma of class structure onto generational and sexual grounds, with individual transformation as the route to class mobility**. More formally, the musical (as has become a common critical theme—c.f. Richard Dyer, *Musicals*) is the great exception to claims of "realist" narrative with its continued disruption of linear or causal propulsion by the utopian movement of the "number." The "number" poses an affirmative solution to the tension of self and society, joyously synthesizing work and play, 'forgetting' class, and, frequently, inscribing a collective representation of the audience into choruses, mass dances. The musicals pose the issue of commodified utopianism and its entwined integrative and, perhaps, 'subversive' movements.

Another main line of films can probably be roughly grouped together as comedy-horror: many are also teen films. It stretches back to *Carrie*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and continues on more recently with *The Howling*, *An American Werewolf in London*, *The Hunger*, *Dracula*, *The Shining*, *Christine*, *Gremlins*, *Twilight Zone*, *Creepshow*, *Cat's Eye*, *The Brother from Another Planet* amongst many others. Obviously, these are of varying interest and cross-generic composition, but they are mostly "hits"; all have a highly developed sense of the psychoanalytic premises of modern horror, a playfully threatening attitude to "normalcy" (and especially the sexual and consumerist ideology and texture of America), an acute sense of self-consciousness of cinematic forms and conventions, and varying refusals of



closure and reassurance. In rough complement to the teen massacre's obsessive fixation on mutilation and castration, many of these films convey a playful fluidity of identity, good/evil, normalcy/monster, configured in an aesthetic concern with monstrous transformation. (Stephen King is the key influence here—he may be a dominant tendency all by himself.)

Finally, I would mention that teen comedies, like other repetitive genres, have developed a set of plot motifs, "social" typage and "education" of their organized audience, so that a degree of ideological diversity is not surprising. To mention a few: *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* has an entertaining female and feminist perspective not entirely overwhelmed by its smug orthodoxy of "sensitivity" and "relationships"; *Baby It's You* has an acute sense of the class trajectories adolescence momentarily suspends (much preferable to most teen musicals' hostility to the working class or dilution of class consciousness into "one chance" liberal individualism); *Diner* offers a pathetic male nostalgia for the lost collective; *The Big Chill* is an aging, cynical variation that pines for a 'radical' collectivity and applauds the loss of cohesive values—an oft-cited representative '80s film; *Mask* and *Turk 182* provide populist variations, etc., etc.

### From Dominance to Pleasure

Clearly, we can construct a "progressive" tendency composed of liberal feminist films, many teen musicals and comedies, comedy-horror films, the cross-dressing films—and without even mentioning the obvious persistence of such old-style liberalism as Norman Jewison (most recently, *A Soldier's Story*) or Warren Beatty (*Reds*) or even the liberal anti-imperialism of *Missing!*, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, and *Under Fire*. This would be the completion of the binary structure of reactionary × progressive which is so crucial to dominant ideology, and it would provide an equally plausible line of popular hits and trends to place beside Wood's Dominant Tendencies. (Perhaps, these are some of the 'progressive' films his ideological criticism seeks.) I don't, however, wish to match his condemnation with a celebration of this "tendency." It can be argued, in fact, that this 'progressive tendency' is insipid and partial in its response to contradiction and social change: it is a parodic counter-part to Wood's list. Feminists

probably feel that media feminism reduces their struggle to a status and imagery not very different from the fitness "movement." Hollywood's bland liberalism may be indicative of the right drift of liberalism; certainly, media feminism, however "insincere," seems to be tracking an increasingly integrated and right-ward moving mainstream feminism, which offers, at best, a quasi-liberation. Some liberals may see the persistence of liberalism as a sign of optimism, that "democratic debate" continues. I suggest a more modest appraisal: that radicals need to perceive dominant ideology and institutions with the complexity they demand, and that we recognize both the dangers of the Right and the persistence of liberalism as repressive and integrative strategies—all speaking in the voice of domination: from Hollywood, the faces of Patriarchy and "feminism" smiling down on us.

Because, of course, it's the same Hollywood that produces all of the "hits" Wood and I have listed, both liberal and conservative, with their usually tidy resolutions and perhaps more contradictory, disruptive pleasures. In fact, "progressive" and "reactionary" ideologies are inadequate responses to social reality in the same way that ideological characterizations (including Wood's and mine) are skeletal approximations of films. Wood's schema, from Patriarchy to narrative, does provide the distance on mass media that has been important to radical criticism. It is a distance, nonetheless, that I think I've shown may be somewhat myopic faced with the diversity of popular film and dominant ideology. Many cultural critics would argue that hostile distance in this sense is no longer useful, faced with the mass media's omnipresent surface of spectacle and image, its proliferating technologies of reproduction, and perhaps, as in Benjamin's phrase, its development of new "sense perceptions" in its audiences. This needn't be a "hopeless" supposition either. The experience of the audience was to Benjamin a potential equivalent to the collision in production of productive forces and class relations.

Marxism, of course, politically proposes a transcendence of bourgeois society's circumscribed progressive and reactionary politics. Perhaps in art we should look at those collective and aesthetic processes that can go beyond the authority of the ideological text. Want to go to the movies??

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ramasse-miette*





# CAT AND DOG:

## Lewis Teague's Stephen King Movies

by Robln Wood

WHILE IT LACKS THE IDIOSYNCRATIC DISTINCTION of De Palma's *Carrie*, Kubrick's *The Shining*, or Cronenberg's *The Dead Zone* (in all of which the Stephen King thematic is conspicuously inflected by the thematic concerns of the filmmaker), Lewis Teague's *Cujo* is perhaps the most satisfying film version of a King novel to date. Partly this is because the novel is, with *Firestarter* and *The Dead Zone*, one of King's finest; yet the abysmal recent version of *Firestarter* (also faithful to the letter of the book) is sufficient proof that this is no guarantee of cinematic success. Teague's film is the most faithful rendering of a King novel I have seen: given the necessary compression, watching the film was like seeing the novel as I had already 'seen' it when reading. Teague is clearly a gifted director, but his 'auteur' image remains undefined, and in *Cujo* he has been content brilliantly to realize the original in cinematic terms. When watching *The Shining* one thinks primarily of Kubrick; when watching *Cujo* one thinks primarily of Stephen King. In discussing the work, then, I shall not distinguish between film and novel, except to note their two significant points of divergence; what interests me here is the cultural significance of Stephen King. For the present issue of *CineAction!* *Cujo* has a particular relevance: it is the one King novel to be centred on an adult woman, and it combines very interestingly certain thematic concerns of the woman's melodrama (sexuality and the family, mother love, adultery, transgression and punishment) with those of the horror film ('normality' threatened by 'the monster').

King prefers to discuss his work (and horror fiction in general<sup>1</sup>) in terms of 'universal,' 'primal' fears: death, darkness, the unknown. One can scarcely deny that such fears are evoked. However, the horrors of King's novels are very firmly rooted in culturally specific disturbances: they belong to a particular phase of American capitalist culture and the sexual and gender relations it has produced. As a context within which to place *Cujo* I want to begin by defining the major components of the King thematic, the areas of disturbance out of which the novels grow; though I separate them for the sake of clarity, it will be clear that they are intimately interrelated. I should say at the outset that by 'King' I understand here a body of work (the novels, the stories and, with occasional qualifications, the films that have been made from them) rather than a human individual: in a very real sense the 'body of work' is the product and expression of a culture (hence both its importance and its popularity). I am interested in psychoanalyzing a group of texts (and through those texts the tensions and struggles within our culture), not the author-as-person.

1. *Ambivalence about marriage and the family.* The books insistently offer marriage and family as their major positive

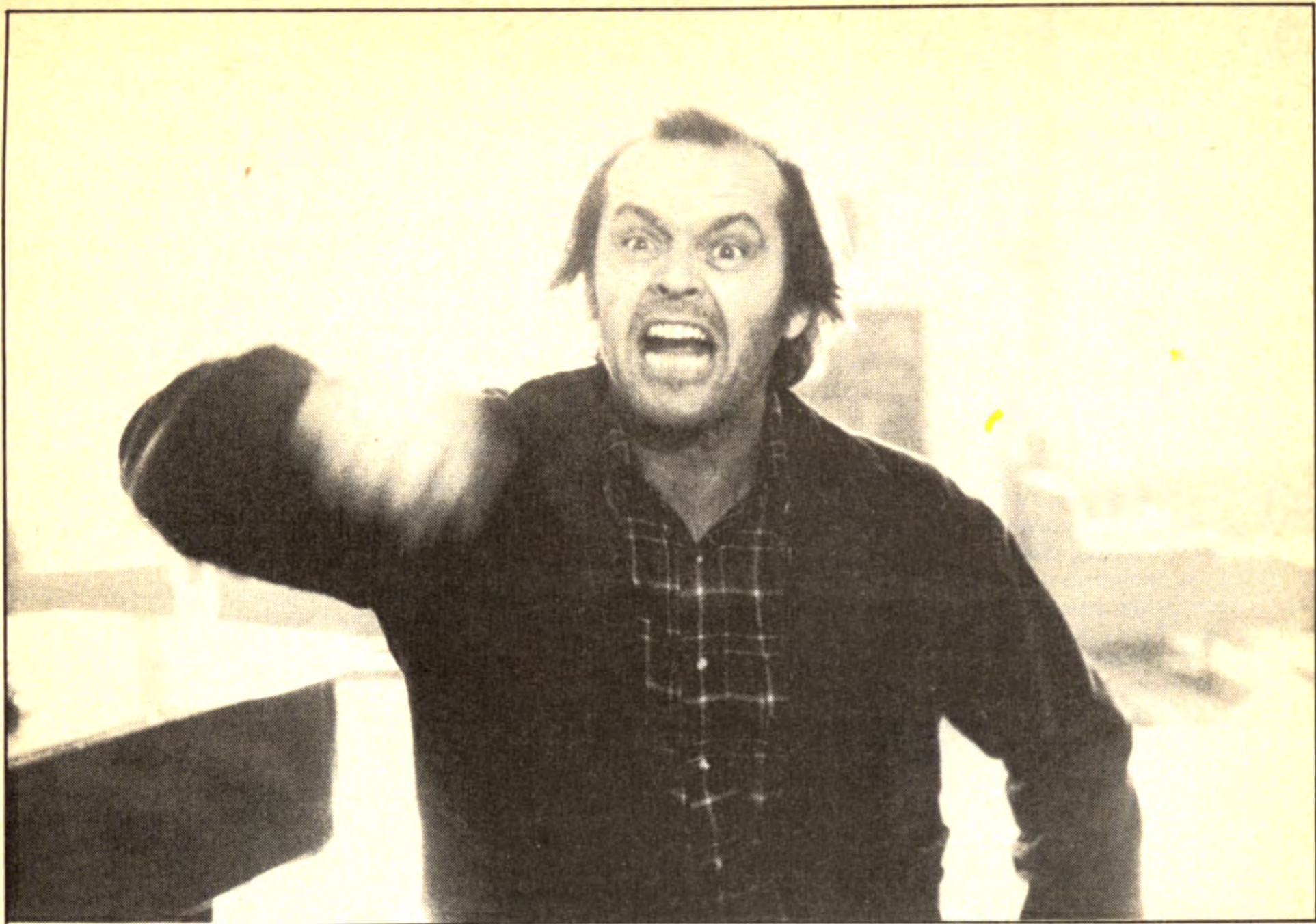
value, never seeming aware that there is any alternative; this is accompanied by their pervasive and implicit recognition that there are no happy families. There are seemingly happy parent-child relationships, especially fathers and young sons (*Cujo*, *The Mist*, *Pet Sematary*), sometimes fathers and young daughters (*Firestarter*, *Thinner*), but they function best in the absence of the mother and are usually accompanied by fantasies of violence and/or death visited on the child. Several of the novels (*The Shining*, *Cujo*, *Pet Sematary*) can be read as fantasies of the destruction of the family by the father. The simultaneous horror and relish is epitomized near the start of *The Mist* (the opening novella of *Skeleton Crew*):

One of those terrible visions came to me—I think they are reserved exclusively for husbands and fathers—of the picture window blowing in with a low hard coughing sound and sending jagged arrows of glass into my wife's bare stomach, into my boy's face and neck. The horrors of the Inquisition are nothing compared to the fates your mind can imagine for your loved ones. (p. 23)

The generalization ('husbands and fathers') is especially interesting in relation to patriarchal culture and the appalling demands and stresses it imposes upon men in the name of authority and 'masculinity': women, apparently, are excluded from such 'visions.' Either they lack the imagination that makes them possible, or they lack the combination of overt anxiety and implicit hatred that gives rise to them.

2. *Male aggression/male masochism.* One would not wish to claim that King is a great creator of characters; his women are particularly colorless (the heroine of *Cujo* the major exception). There are virtually no independent women in his work (the lesbian of *The Stand*—his worst novel—remains a curious anomaly, unconvincingly and uneasily depicted). In the King world, women are wives and mothers, and ideally they are much in need of male protection (if they don't realize it there is something wrong with them). The books cannot attack the institutions of marriage and family to which they are committed (whilst demonstrating *ad infinitum* that they don't work); consequently, they repeatedly endorse bourgeois domesticity as right, natural and inevitable whilst expressing the most intense resentment of it in vindictive fantasy. Domesticity is centred on—is essentially *for*—the woman; hence (despite the repeated assertions of the male's love and need for her), she is resented whether she meekly acquiesces in domesticity or not. If she does (the wife in *The Shining*), she represents everything that traps and emasculates the male; if she rebels (however feebly, like the reluctantly adulterous wife in *Cujo*), she is ungrateful and the resentment can be visited upon her as monstrous punish-





Jack Nicholson: the husband/father monster of *The Shining*.

ment. The resultant rage and frustration (the husband/father monster of *The Shining*, Cujo as the embodiment of masculine aggression) has, however, its inevitable corollary in male masochism, the intolerable burden of guilt the aggression brings in its wake and the desire for self-punishment. *Cujo* gives us the ultimate expression of this: the figure of masculine aggression is a rabid dog, disintegrating and dying in protracted agony. On the level on which they are offered—fantasies to get lost in—King's novels obviously imply a male readership and give no space to female pleasure (except to women who are totally complicit in their subordination). **The only way in which women (and gays) might get valid pleasure from the novels is by reading them intelligently, as horrifying revelations of what being a heterosexual male within patriarchal culture entails.**

3. *Homophobia*. This may seem a marginal constituent of the King world, but it is a crucial one. The reason why it achieves relatively little *overt* expression is doubtless explainable in terms of inhibition: the enormous progress of the gay movement in the last two decades has made it difficult openly to express hatred and disgust of homosexuals. There are no positive references to male homosexuals in the King novels, and very few that can be charitably construed as neutral. It is interesting that one narrative thread introduced early in *Firestarter* (the novel that also offers the most positive image of female energy, significantly embodied in a child) is abruptly dropped, never to be taken up again: we are told near the beginning of the book that the man who exactly parallels the little girl's strange, dangerous and defiantly anti-establishment abilities is a 'faggot.' The narrative logic

is plain: the threat posited by unrepressed female energy is paralleled by that of gay sexuality. It is a logic the King world cannot encompass, and the character is never mentioned again.

The occasional derogatory reference apart, the novels express their homophobia only obliquely, by association. The corruptible pimply fat man in *The Stand* (inevitably named Harold) has been afraid that he *might* be homosexual; Stillson, the monstrous future president of *The Dead Zone* who may bring about the end of the world, never goes with women and has a constant male companion; one of the supreme horrors witnessed by the little boy (in Kubrick's film by the mother) in *The Shining* is an act of homosexual fellatio; the vampire and his assistant of *Salem's Lot* (significantly masquerading as antique dealers!) are rumored to be a gay couple. The last example is the key one in relation to this aspect of the King novels, as (in its devious way) it is central to the structure of the entire book. **The vampires, through their extraordinarily potent and pervasive contagion, essentially construct an alternative world without marriage or family, in which all are equal.** The book regards them, of course, with the most extreme horror and revulsion, but never finds it necessary to explain why it is so terrible to *be* one. What it *does* demonstrate, with King's usual thoroughness, is the wretchedness of the sexual/familial social organization that the vampires destroy.

4. *Repressed/sublimated homosexuality*. **Homophobia has no rational motivation—which is what makes that curious affliction so interesting.** It can be explained only in psychoanalytic terms. Freud's investigations proved conclusively



(at least, I have not seen them convincingly refuted) that the human individual is innately bisexual and that the homosexual side of that bisexuality has to be repressed in order to construct the successfully 'socialized' adult, the participant in that 'normality' which the King novels so devastatingly dramatize. Homophobia results when that repression is less than completely successful—when, that is, one's homosexuality is experienced as a constant, if unconscious, threat. In fact, I think it is time to redefine homophobia, which is a far more pervasive mental illness than is commonly recognized (fewer and fewer people are willing to express overt antagonism to gays): homophobia is the inability to accept one's own bisexuality. Masculine violence in our culture (the construction of the male as violent) must be read as the result of the repression of bisexuality. Violence against women: the woman represents the threat of the man's repressed femininity. Violence against other men: the man represents the threat of the arousal of homosexual desire. It is a syndrome magnificently dramatized in Scorsese's *Raging Bull*,<sup>2</sup> one of the few masterpieces of the '80s, in which the essential thematic of the King novels is realized (significantly, outside the 'Gothic' genre) with a coherence and economy of which the novels are never quite capable.

The relationship between repression and sublimation is a complex and difficult one, and it is often hard to see where one ends and the other begins. What is repressed is forced down into the unconscious, inaccessible to consciousness, manifesting itself only in dreams, jokes (Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull*: 'I don't know whether to fuck him or fight him') and fantasies. Some portion of 'surplus' sexual energy, however, can go the way of sublimation, transformed into what our culture calls the 'higher' pursuits: pleasurable work, art, creativity. The difficulty of the distinction is evident if one tries to discuss so-called 'beautiful' (i.e. non-sexual) friendships: male camaraderie, the 'buddy' syndrome, can be read as the result of part-repression, part-sublimation. It is hardly surprising that the homophobia of King's novels should be consistently counterpointed by the presence of just such male relationships. Again, *Salem's Lot* provides the prototype (and Tobe Hooper's disappointing made-for-TV film version at least has the merit, through compression and the elimination of much of the novel's wearisome repetition and superfluous elaboration, of rendering the essential of the structure with schematic clarity): it is through the 'beautiful friendship' of man and adolescent boy that the vampires are finally (though ambiguously) destroyed, an extraordinarily precise account of the enactment of repression.

The precariously repressed homosexuality that pervades King's novels (and our entire culture) rises nearer and nearer to the surface in recent books. *Thinner* (published under the pseudonym of Richard Bachman) can easily be read as a paranoid fantasy about AIDS. The terrible old gypsy with the cancerous nose, when he places his curse, strokes the male protagonist's cheek 'like a lover.' One of his victims wastes away almost to a skeleton, the second develops scales like an alligator, the third suffers from an eruption of sores all over his body; a major symptom of AIDS is extreme weight loss, and its common consequence is skin cancer. More remarkable still is the introduction to King's latest publication, a collection of short stories published under the title *Skeleton Crew*. It ends:

Grab onto my arm now. Hold tight. We are going into a number of dark places, but I think I know the way. Just don't let go of my arm. And if I should kiss you in the dark, it's no big deal; it's only because you are my love . . . (pp. 17-18)

As I suggested above, the novels clearly address a male readership.

The most painful aspect in King's work of the homophobia/homosexuality syndrome is that involving male children. Freud is quite clear (though society is still reluctant to understand him) on the subject of infantile sexuality: the infant is polymorphously erotic, capable of enjoying physical contact in diverse forms and with members of either sex. The male child's first homosexual contact is likely to be with his father, a pleasure that 'socialization' decrees he must swiftly renounce. The King novels have many moments of father-son intimacy, and they tend to be the moments of greatest happiness. *Pet Sematary* is especially eloquent on this:

'It was a moment with his son that Louis never forgot. As he had gone up and into the kite as a child himself, he now found himself going into Gage, his son. He felt himself shrink until he was within Gage's tiny house, looking out of the windows that were his eyes . . .

"Kite flyne!" Gage cried out to his father, and Louis put his arm around Gage's shoulders and kissed the boy's cheek, in which the wind had bloomed a wild rose.

"I love you, Gage," he said—it was between the two of them, and that was all right. (p. 198)

What is disturbing is not at all these privileged moments of perfectly natural man/boy erotic contact (they are among the most touching things in the novels), but the terrible consequences they seem (albeit in narrative terms very indirectly) to entail. It is as if the arousal of the man's erotic feelings for a male child were so troubling that both man and child must be punished for it: the child by being subjected to a whole series of horrors and torments (*Salem's Lot*, *The Shining*, *Cujo*, *The Mist*, *Pet Sematary*), the man by being



Shelley Duvall, the protective mother in *The Shining*.



identified as monstrous (literally in *The Shining*, by implication in *Pet Sematary*, through a symbolic surrogate in *Cujo*). At times the narrative, while not admitting to any direct cause-and-effect, makes the connection by close juxtaposition: the very next sentence to the passage from *Pet Sematary* quoted above tells us that Gage has less than two months to live.

**T**HIS ACCOUNT (NECESSARILY, IN THE SPACE available, selective and partial—there is far more to be said, but it would need to be said at book length) of King's novels could be mistaken for two things it is not intended to be: a presumptuous attempt to psychoanalyze the author, and an attack on the books. As for the former, it is an old dodge to reduce the analysis of culturally produced texts to the analysis of an individual: the cultural implications of the work, its general relevance to all of us, can then be sidestepped, disowned as the idiosyncrasies of an aberrant individual (albeit a 'genius'—the term often operating as a means of just such disownment). I don't find King's work, in relation to the norms of our culture, in the least aberrant. The novels are a battleground on which the central conflict of our civilization (rather than, as King himself might put it, the eternal struggle between good and evil), the conflict between repressive 'normality' and the drives that normality seeks to repress, is fought out (and, so far, neither definitively won nor lost—typically in the novels both sides lose). In so far as I am interested in King as a person, it is to admire his courage in daring to offer himself as the medium through which that struggle can be expressed. As for the books, I love them (especially the later ones). On the conscious level—the level at which the author asserts what he means to say, in contradistinction to what the texts he produces say—the novels are, for all their liberal critique of Reaganite America, plainly reactionary. The liberal critique is their least interesting aspect (liberal critiques being invariably impotent, unable to do more than wave their hands in the air and say, 'Isn't it terrible?'). But, like much superficially reactionary work (the films of John Ford, for example), the texts generate so many internal tensions and contradictions at such a pitch of intensity that the whole repressive social/ideological structure is blown wide open, its monstrousness revealed. The horrors of the King world are the horrors of our culture writ large, made visible and inescapable.

It must be added that the impressiveness of King's work exists within severe limitations and perhaps could not survive without them. They are precisely the limitations of the 'Gothic' genre,<sup>3</sup> and the unresolvable, appalling stalemate of the novels at once, chicken-and-egg-like, demands that genre for its expression and is perpetually imprisoned within it: the 'Gothic,' one might say, ensures that the battle could never be won, making the victory of repression impossible and the victory of liberation intolerable. I have not yet dealt with the most obvious, and in some ways most impressive, aspect of King's work, that area in the novels that dramatizes 'the repressed' and its inexorable return: the Marsten House of *Salem's Lot*, the Overlook Hotel of *The Shining*, the possessed car of *Christine*, the Micmac burying-ground of *Pet Sematary*, the gypsies of *Thinner*. The fascination of the novels is clearly the fascination of these potent evocations of the repressed, to which the protagonists and the reader are irresistibly drawn. Yet in the novels, as in the Gothic generally, the energies that give that world its potency can only be depicted as monstrous: they threaten that 'normality' to which the books believe themselves to be

committed. The impasse of the novels is the impasse of our culture. There are roads beyond it,<sup>4</sup> but they lie necessarily outside the Gothic. To travel them would require a total rethinking of the 'return of the repressed' in positive terms: *Firestarter*, the most positive of all King's novels and the one least related to the Gothic genre, suggested that he was about to engage on just such an undertaking, though the subsequent novels have conspicuously withdrawn from it (*Pet Sematary* in particular returning to the Gothic with a vengeance). Centrally, it would involve the full recognition and acceptance of constitutional bisexuality, with all the implications and consequences of such an acceptance: the transformation of male and female roles and heterosexual relations, the rethinking of the family, the positive acceptance of homosexual love as natural rather than aberrant, the overthrow of socially constructed norms of masculinity and femininity, the recognition of infantile eroticism. Meanwhile, the impasse has seldom been dramatized with such compelling intensity as in the novels of Stephen King.

**T**HE CONTEXT CONSTRUCTED ABOVE MAY help to call into immediate question the simplistic reduction of *Cujo* to yet another violence-against-women movie, subspecies 'punishment for adultery.' I don't wish to imply that that theme is absent; rather, that it represents only one strand in the text, which is strongly qualified by others. One may point immediately to the simple fact that, while the major emphasis is clearly on the protracted terrorization of Donna Trenton and her son Tad in their stranded car, the three people *Cujo* actually kills are all men: two brutal macho buddies and a policeman.

Again, the necessary compression and stripping down have resulted in the clarification of the novel's structure—or perhaps one should say structures. There is the admirably crafted linear narrative leading to the sustained *tour de force* of suspense and terror within a severely restricted space (the car itself, the farmyard surrounding it, from any section of which *Cujo* may emerge) that occupies the second half of both novel and film. This both sustains and is sustained by a complex but much less clearly defined (presumably because less consciously worked) semantic/symbolic structure built on parallels and oppositions. Primarily, there are the two families, both consisting of father, mother and male child: the 'good' family, bourgeois, stable, loving and respectable (the Trentons); the 'bad' family, working-class, disordered, loveless, brutalized by a vicious father/husband (the Cambers, owners of the huge St. Bernard *Cujo*). But the goodness of the 'good' family is merely apparent: Donna, we make out, is unsatisfied both sexually and by her role as housewife/mother, and is secretly screwing the town stud Steve Kemp. Neither the novel nor film, I think, blames her for this; if *Cujo* is her punishment, then we experience it as a punishment out of all proportion to any crime, like the shower murder in *Psycho*, and Donna is throughout our main identification-figure. The sense of the two families as each other's mirror image is confirmed by a specific inversion: if both are characterized by dissatisfaction and frustration, the primary source of this in the Camber family is the father, in the Trentons the mother. Vic Trenton, professionally successful (in advertising), upwardly mobile, unimaginative and complacent, shows no signs of dissatisfaction until he discovers Donna's adultery; there is the sense that Charity Camber, who has married beneath her and retains aspirations to gentility, would be perfectly contented as the 'good wife' if only she had a good husband. Just as it is Donna's lack of fulfilment that disturbs the Trenton family, it is Joe





Keith Gordon and Alexandra Paul in John Carpenter's version of Stephen King's *Christine*.

Camber's frustration (deriving from his debased frontiersman mentality and his failure to 'get anywhere') that destroys the Cambers. The opposition has resonances right through the system of the Hollywood genres and the ideological male/female roles they dramatize: Joe, failed as the wanderer-hero of the Western, can't be content with settling; Donna, in the honorable tradition of the woman's melodrama, can't fit happily into her preordained role of supportive housewife/mother. The film systematically parallels the disintegration of the two families, and parallels both with the disintegration of Cujo from amiable pet to rabid monster.

What exactly does Cujo represent? 'Exactly,' I think the question is impossible to answer. It is one of the great strengths of Realist art that it enables the artist (under cover of 'just telling a story') to release his/her fantasies, allowing them partly to escape the vigilant censor (as repressed desires, according to Freud, can be released in dreams). The corollary of this is the frequent difficulty in interpreting Realist texts: the components of the fantasy may derive from numerous diverse and perhaps contradictory sources working at different levels, so that no single, coherent meaning is produced—rather, a sum of connotations. In the course of the film Cujo accumulates the following resonances:

a. During the opening credits sequence, Cujo pursues a rabbit, gets his head stuck in a hole, and is repeatedly bitten by rabid bats. The sequence evokes the most primitive male sexual fears of women: getting stuck in the *vagina dentata*. I am uncertain how much weight to give this in reading the remainder of the film: its position as starting-point for the narrative (Cujo's monstrousness is the direct result)

obviously confers importance on it, yet it seems to me (I may be wrong) not especially illuminating in relation to much of the film's detail.

b. Tad Trenton believes there is a monster in his closet, the door of which swings open by itself at night; subsequently, in the besieged car, he identifies this monster with Cujo. The open closet door seems to correspond to the hole in which Cujo gets stuck, but the monster in this case is clearly male. The simple Freudian explanation would be that Tad, in the Oedipal phase, is fantasizing his punishment for desiring the mother (and we shall see later that Cujo is clearly associated with the vengeful father). In the context of the film, however, **one tends to read the incident as dramatizing the child's disturbed, intuitive sense of something secretly wrong at the centre of the family:** although neither Vic nor the spectator knows this yet, Donna is already conducting her illicit affair with Steve Kemp, and we are soon given various hints of suppressed familial tension. From this association, then, Cujo represents a generalized disturbance within the patriarchal nuclear family—the disturbance produced by the Oedipal tensions the family nurtures and by the woman's dissatisfaction and transgression of its repressive norms.

c. Three of the male characters (Joe Camber, his buddy Gary Pervier, Steve Kemp) are all clearly characterized as brutal, violent and destructive, and implicitly or explicitly as antagonistic to women. By implication, then, as well as in the juxtapositions of the intricately intercut narrative threads, **all are associated with Cujo as figures of masculine aggression.** They are also in various ways antagonistic to domesticity, and Cujo as monster can be read as enacting their





Dee Wallace as Donna Trenton ravaged by *Cujo*.

combined assault on the bourgeois home ('normality') in his assault on mother and child. What does one make (beyond plot convenience), then, of the fact that Gary and Joe are Cujo's first two victims? Within the specific terms of the narrative, not much: it seems one of the aspects of the film that has not been thought through, that fails to achieve resonance. Outside those terms, however, one can point to the social construction of masculinity within our culture, built on the repression of bisexuality and the repudiation of male femininity, which produces violence against men as much as against women: **masculinity, gone mad, turns upon itself.**

d. In contrast to Joe, Gary and Steve, Vic Trenton is presented as (if unexciting) gentle, decent and civilized. Yet it is he with whom Cujo is most intimately associated, in the film more clearly than in the novel. One way in which this reading is confirmed is through **intertextual association**: the scene in *The Shining* in which the wife, motivated primarily by her desire to protect her little boy, swings at her monster husband with a baseball bat is exactly reproduced in *Cujo*, except that here the monster is a dog. Far more explicit is the film's one major improvement on the original narrative: the central climactic scene of violence in which Donna is savaged by Cujo in the car (it *looks* very like rape), clearly signified as 'real,' is also Vic's nightmare, Teague cutting abruptly to his appalled awakening. It was Vic, earlier, who

most emphatically resisted the notion that 'monsters' exist, yet simultaneously acknowledged their existence by inventing and writing out for Tad the 'monster words' ritualistically forbidding them access to the child's bedroom. The paradox has complex resonances with regard to the father/child relationships in the King novels. As soon as Cujo as monster materializes, the 'monster words' lose all their supposed efficacy.

The association of Cujo with Vic is of course central to the logic of the narrative: **Cujo becomes the instrument, the enactment, of the betrayed husband's revenge.** The discrepancy between the human character and the animal surrogate is so extreme—as is the monstrosity of Donna's punishment, inflicted not only on her but on the loved and innocent child—that the fantasy leads one to question the whole basis of male sexual possessiveness. As Donna has no intention of leaving her husband and breaking up the family, why is it so terrible that she enjoys sexual pleasure occasionally with another man?—why does the act bring down upon her this hideous vengeance? The only plausible answer seems to lie in male sexual anxiety—the other lover may be 'better.' (The syndrome has been incomparably explored by Hitchcock, most notably in the paralleling of the Cary Grant and Claude Rains characters of *Notorious*). This in turn raises the question of why our culture has such an obsessive and excessive stake in phallic potency, performance, penis-size, etc.



The phenomenon explains why *Cujo* is simultaneously, like the phallus when it is erected (so to speak) into a symbol, both monstrous and pathetic: it is not merely a matter of revenge on an individual transgressing woman, but of an incoherent protest against the demands our civilization places on male potency.

If the invention of Vic's nightmare is a major plus for the film, it is unfortunately countered by a corresponding minus. At the end of the novel, Tad is dead, at the end of the film he has apparently survived, and the final shot is a freeze-frame of father, mother and child reunited on the steps of the Camber house. **The film's choice is not, within the context of the specific narrative, illogical, but it is false to the spirit of the King world.** Only one King novel, *The Stand*, which is atypical in many ways, ends with the nuclear family intact, and the tensions and contradictions the novels dramatize really forbid the traditional restorative happy ending. (John Carpenter's version of *Christine*—which also manages totally to destroy the novel's careful ambiguity at a single stroke in the pre-credit sequence—makes the same error, implying the formation of the heterosexual couple that the novel absolutely rejects). **The psychic discords of the King world are too basic and too shattering to permit the imposition of a harmonious final cadence.**

**C**AT'S EYE, WHILE MINOR (ITS MATERIAL IS relatively slight, **King's stories generally depending on the elaboration of a single gimmick** and rarely achieving the resonances of the novels), deserves a brief postscript for its peculiar relationship to *Cujo*. The basis for the film was largely arbitrary and accidental: Dino de Laurentiis had the rights to two (unrelated) stories from *Night Shift*, neither containing a role for a young girl, and he had Drew Barrymore under contract. King was invited to produce a screenplay that would add a new story constructed specifically for Barrymore, and find some means of tying the package together. Like *Cujo*, the film is consistently gripping thanks to Teague's taut direction, **once again intelligent without manifesting any strong traits of a definable authorial presence**; but its chief interest lies in the solution he and King found to the problem of unification: the presence of the cat as witness that gives the film its title.

Western culture has traditionally associated cats with women. Newcomers to our apartment almost invariably refer to our cat as 'she' (and the habit is so strong that some continue to do so after being told that his name is Max); dogs, unless they be poodles or pekingese, are as commonly referred to as 'he.' The Hollywood cinema offers a long list of examples of the cat/woman association: *Bringing Up Baby*, *Cat People*, *Bell, Book and Candle*, *Rampage*, *Marnie*, etc. *Cat's Eye* plays on this throughout and also on the cat/dog opposition, opening by establishing a quite explicit link to *Cujo*: the cat is pursued through the alleys and refuse of an urban slum area by an apparently rabid St. Bernard. If *Cujo* was masculinity gone mad, the cat represents the feminine viewpoint, a feminine presence even in those sections of the film from which women are absent.

The first story, *Quitters, Inc.*, is concerned with the subordination and victimization of women within marriage: the man's 'cure' for smoking is the organization's threat to inflict sadistic torments on his wife every time he is caught. Here the cat and the wife are directly paralleled, each in turn subjected to torture by electric shock under the husband's scrutiny, the cat as a demonstration of the punishment, the wife as the punishment itself. The second story, *The Ledge*, is

again about the monstrosity of masculinity: the two heterosexual males, husband and lover, humiliate and torment each other in turn, exacting mutual revenge. The story's energy derives, again, from the male anxiety that underlies male sexual possessiveness. The woman (we discover that she has been murdered on her husband's orders) is absent from most of the story, but the presence in the film of the cat as witness gives it a perspective the original lacks, a feminine view of masculine behavior.

In the last story the cat becomes the protagonist. Drew Barrymore is assaulted every night by a tiny malignant troll that hides in the woodwork of her nursery. Like *Cujo*, the troll is somewhat vaguely associated with tensions within the family: the father surreptitiously sides with the daughter against the mother. The father/child relationship that recurs throughout the King novels is not exclusively centred on a male child: *Firestarter* and *Thinner* both extend it to a daughter, though again it typically involves the elimination or absence of the mother (in the last part of *Thinner* the father is actually planning effectively to murder the wife in order to have the daughter all to himself). All this is only embryonically present in *Cat's Eye*; it seems significant, however, in relation to it, that the troll's nocturnal assaults carry strong overtones of rape (he wants to steal the girl's breath by sucking it out of her). The cat, victimized by males throughout the preceding stories, here takes the initiative, defending the child and finally killing the troll; child and cat end up united, the cat now lying on the girl's chest in the troll's position. **It looks for a moment as if the film is going to succumb to the usual demand for a gimmicky 'final twist,'** with the cat as the new predator, but this is rejected in favor of an unambiguous shared contentment, a mutual pleasure in contact between child and cat.

The association of women with cats has been attacked on occasion as yet another male-constructed myth, designed to link women with the irrational and intuitive in order to imply their inferiority. Yet men have been connected to animals in our culture just as often as women (think of vampire and werewolf mythology, King Kong, *Cujo*). One would need to consider each instance on its own terms, examining the particular connotations, but it seems arguable in general that the cat represents the woman's active side, the energies society has traditionally associated with masculinity and has consequently sought to repress in women to construct them as submissive and dependent (as Richard Lippe has pointed out to me, it is especially interesting that in *Bell, Book and Candle* the cat, while clearly an extension of the woman, is emphatically designated as male). The final image of *Cat's Eye*, then, implying the child's possession of and sense of harmony with her active, assertive natural energies, is a very positive one. **I have no wish to claim *Cat's Eye* as a major feminist text—its meaning flickers too sporadically, with too many distractions—**yet it is of considerable interest in relation to *Cujo* and the King world in general.

## FOOTNOTES

1. See *Danse Macabre*, King's book on horror fiction.
2. I develop this in an analysis of Scorsese's film in my forthcoming book, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*.
3. For a much fuller discussion of this, see Andrew Britton's essay "The Devil, Probably: the Symbolism of Evil," in *The American Nightmare* (available from the Canadian Film Institute).
4. The final essay (by Burstyn herself) in Varda Burstyn's anthology *Women Against Censorship* (Douglas and McIntyre) offers magnificent suggestions as to where such roads might lead.





Jean Baptiste (Pierre Curzi, right) and a salesman (Marcel Sabourin): the pros and cons of underwear.

# On Le Jour S . . .

by Anthony Irwin

**T**HE WORK OF QUEBEC FILM-MAKER JEAN Pierre Lefebvre, which is virtually unknown in English speaking Canada, has, until this year, received no distribution in Ontario. Last fall the Toronto Film Festival featured his newest film, *Le Jour S . . .*, which, following the festival, had a rather short theatre run. Both this film and Lefebvre's work in general are pertinent examples of neglected film, and in particular French Canadian cinema that is overlooked by Toronto audiences.

While its protagonist searches for the consummate pair of underwear, Jean Pierre Lefebvre's new film, *Le Jour S . . .*, manages to raise some serious questions about male repres-

sion and its effects upon heterosexual relationships. The film is at once thoughtful analysis and light accessible comedy; "Humour," we are told, "is the polite form of despair." A poetic work of gently shifting moods and meanings, the film is a weave of seemingly disparate elements. Narrative realism is wed to poetic symbolism and the real is joined with the imagined. The individual is spun with society, conscious awareness with unconscious desire, and finally the everyday moments of a life are united with the larger histories that help to form and inform those moments. These threads of varying hue are further woven into a multicolored work that, although not unproblematic, is at the formal level immensely satisfying.

The film is a psycho-sexual history of Jean Baptiste (sympathetically played by Pierre Curzi), a middle-aged male,



who in the 1980s becomes conscious of a crisis in his relationship to women. The substance of this crisis is succinctly revealed in the film's prologue. Jean Baptiste is in his kitchen. From the radio comes the voice of a woman, a feminist speaking about the relationship between women and men. He flips through a catalogue, stopping to stare at the photographs of women in the lingerie section. A look of pleasure comes over his face. This sequence works in two ways. The film deals very explicitly with the ways in which images of women are constructed and consumed in the male-dominated society. The sympathetically rendered, intelligent voice of woman remains just that, a voice without a body. The male stares at silent bodies. The voice is symbolically separated from the body which becomes merely an object. Later in the film two incongruous images of women are juxtaposed. Two boys seated in the back of a bus pore over picture-perfect photos of women in a *Playboy* magazine. When a pregnant woman enters the frame—that is, takes the seat in front of the boys—they, becoming embarrassed, are forced to move out of the frame. Clearly the construction of woman as sexual image is incompatible with the construction of woman as image of motherhood.

At a second level the radio/lingerie sequence represents the crisis as it occurs to Jean Baptiste. The voice on the radio is like a conscience, an enunciation of his awareness of the oppressed position of women within the patriarchal order. Yet at the same time he derives pleasure from gazing at women as objects, an element of that same oppression. It is a pleasure that is not easily explained away. On the one hand there is an awareness of the need for men to change the way they see women, on the other the difficulty of coming to terms with the deep psychological structuring of those ways of seeing.

Beginning early one morning and ending early the next, the film is composed of events and shifting moods that are a day in the life of Jean Baptiste. In that single day, however, a whole history is revealed. Lefebvre has ingeniously constructed a film that, although intent upon the past, manages, with the exception of three short flashbacks, to remain within the materiality of the film's present tense. It is by dividing the film into five titled chapters, each concerned with a particular stage in the development of Jean Baptiste's relationship to women, that Lefebvre has achieved a subtle melding of past and present. 'Childhood,' the first chapter, deals with the mystification of sexuality. As Jean Baptiste travels through the morning city, observations and events trigger memories of childhood and the shroud of mystery in which his parents concealed the birth and sexual difference of his younger sister. The events of the present are pointed and genuinely funny while the memories have a more sombre tone. "What you don't know can't hurt you," Jean Baptiste tells his tape recorder. But the statement ends disturbingly as a question. "Childhood" speaks of the seeds of repression, the denial of curiosity. "Adolescence" deals with the response to that denial. Here voyeurism is institutionalized in the habit of girl-watching and in the viewing of a pornographic film, which Jean Baptiste finds very enjoyable; that is, until the projector, bizarrely cognizant of the events on the screen, bursts into flames at the appropriate climactic moment, placing Jean Baptiste in imminent danger of being caught with the shame of his voyeurism.

In "Adulthood," Jean Baptiste literally runs into his ex-wife Louise. Each determined to out-liberalize the other, to throw off old burdens, they decide to rent a hotel room for the afternoon. The ensuing sequence, assembled with wonderful economy, is the most successful of the film. The dis-

comfort of each with the other's naked body is carried visually via the camera's steadfast refusal to shoot below the shoulders. Thus the composition of the shot of the embracing couple carries the rigid tension that they feel: the tension that they attempt to mollify with the conviction that they, as liberated individuals, should be able to enjoy one another freely. Clearly liberation is not a matter of convincing oneself with words. Marie Tifo, who plays all the female roles in the film, is wonderful as she self-consciously adjusts her glasses which, being a symbol of her new self, she refuses to remove. There has, however, been a change in Louise, a change reflected in her demands of Jean Baptiste who finds it all to be too much. In the humorous shot that follows, Curzi manages to sum up the sense of dejection and failure in his physical expression alone. "Was it the glasses?" Louise queries. The entire sequence is performed with such intent upon the visual nature of film that it could almost be viewed silently without loss of meaning or comedic impact.

The fourth chapter, "Bitterness," deals with failure; Jean Baptiste's sexual failure which, typically, he is unable to forget, and more generally, the failure of the heterosexual male to come to terms with his relationship to women. It begins with an absurd, and absurdly interjected, definition of a man. He is "a guy three apples high who skates around the forum eating pie." An expression of empty and vain movement, the statement becomes particularly acute in light of graffiti observed and recorded earlier in the film: "If I were a man I'd kill myself." Suddenly alone, the darkness of night closing in, Jean Baptiste experiences nightmarish phantasies, expressions of the hollow side of his relation-



Jean Baptiste (Pierre Curzi) contemplates the coming day.



ships with women. He performs in a 'Harlequin Romance' encounter (whose dialogue comes straight from the grocery store bookshelf) and envisions himself making love to a store window mannequin. His mind in a state of riot, even his tape recorder, faithful companion and ardent listener, becomes a spewer of sardonic verse: "the pink cadillac of true love ends on the scrap heap." The entire section evokes an eerie suicidal emptiness that is summed up in Jean Baptiste's expression of arresting despair as he confesses his fear of the future. It is a fear that arises from the hopelessness of the present.

The response to that hopelessness is "Today," the problematic final chapter. Jean Baptiste is in love with Claire Renault; so we are told, repeatedly. It is apparently 'pure' love, for Jean Baptiste is suddenly allowed to transcend the past and its problems. The film's subject is no longer the relationship of men to women, but is now a particular man's love for a particular woman. Context is dissolved. Formally this development is an intelligent one. The union of the couple has been anticipated from the film's beginning, as has the union of Jean Baptiste's past with his present. As the narrative flattens into a 'pure' present, the ability to analyze is negated; analysis being dependent upon distance. It is noteworthy that Claire, turning on the television, invites Jean Baptiste (the audience?) to "watch (participate in?) a real love story." There is a tremendous appeal in this denial of analysis in what often seems such an overly self-conscious age. Jean Baptiste's despair is negated in the moments that he is with Claire, his 'perfect woman.' The sense created by this final chapter is, at the immediate level, very satisfying indeed. However, it does little to satisfy the problem of male

repression which is raised by the rest of the film. In the arms of the caring woman all problems are allowed to slip back into the darkness of the unknown, begging the earlier question, "What you don't know can't hurt you?" The incongruous last chapter effectively invalidates the rest of the film by reducing the problems of heterosexual relationships to that of finding the right partner, thereby disconnecting them from a history of repression.

I am not, however, entirely convinced that Lefebvre is speaking without irony, for the couple retreats to the total isolation of a hotel room high above the city where Jean Baptiste has spent the day wandering. That reality, that past, literally forms the backdrop for this world of the 'real love story.' An admirer calls, and he too is in love with Claire Renault; or more correctly, he is in love with an eroticized image of Claire, replete with a drop of perfume that rolls to the breast. His voice is like information leaking in from the outside world. In the world of 'true love,' Jean Baptiste need not know of these things. Though they exist all about him, he can choose not to know.

Lefebvre's intentions become unclear in this last section of the film and I am not convinced that either of these readings, that Jean Baptiste is truly 'saved' by his relationship with Claire, or that it is a way of avoiding the source of his despair, is entirely or exclusively correct. However, each reading does lead to divergent conclusions of the film's ultimate worth as an analysis of the role of male repression in the heterosexual relationship. I can only hope that we will be seeing more of Lefebvre's work in Toronto and that his intentions will become clearer. □



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